

Recovery

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Recovery

by [wateryoudoing](#)

Summary

Satsuki is depressed after the defeat of her mother and turns to alcohol to cope, but things get out of hand. Ryuko saves her life in more ways than one.

Notes

Hello! This is my first kill la kill fic (actually my fist fic ever), so constructive criticism is welcome. I'm dealing with my own depression by writing this story (though mine is nowhere near as bad as Satsuki's). Also I am a nurse, so if certain parts seem too medically involved, I can revise and tone it down a bit. Anyways, enjoy!

Chapter 1

Alone in the Kiryuin manor, Satsuki sat on her bed in her darkened bedroom, head in her hands and a nearly empty pint of vodka resting against her leg. This was not the first or the last bottle of alcohol to be consumed in the month since her mother's defeat. Satsuki rubbed her temples before violently grabbing the bottle next to her and crashing it into her lips, allowing the remaining liquid to pour down her throat. She gagged as it burned at her throat like the memories burned into her mind. No matter how much she drank, she could not escape the feeling of those hands caressing her, beating her, abusing her. Despite this fact, she continued to imbibe the vile liquor. Convinced that the burning in her stomach could somehow overpower the memories that plagued her, she had taken to drinking more alcohol each night in an attempt to find solace from the overwhelming pain she felt.

You are weak, Satsuki, said the voice of her mother in the back of her head as Satsuki's consciousness seemed to fade, blurring reality and the past. Suddenly she found herself hanging from her wrists again as her mother opened the door to the underground metal prison and let it clank shut menacingly behind her.

"Did you really think your pathetic plan would be enough to defeat me, your own mother? You are a failure of a child and a disgusting excuse of a Kiryuin. I should have kept your sister and thrown you into the trash instead," Ragyo leered, moving behind Satsuki and placing her mouth next to her ear. "Look at you now. You're nothing more than a pawn, a sacrifice for my plan. I will make sure that you do not make it out of this alive," she threatened ominously before suddenly reaching around Satsuki and grabbing her jaw forcefully.

Startled, Satsuki flinched and gasped as her mother's cold fingers dug into the bluish bruises that still covered her face from her mother's assault to take back Junketsu. "I'm going to make you suffer until I can dispose of you properly," Ragyo whispered as her free hand grabbed a fistful of Satsuki's hair and yanked her head backwards. Ragyo then snaked her other arm around Satsuki's neck and squeezed until her body went limp and her world went black.

"NO! NO NO NO NO NO NO NO!" Satsuki screamed as she bolted up from her bed, gasping for air and clawing at the collar of her shirt before wrestling it off in its entirety and throwing it across the room. A cold sweat covered her body, clinging to her like the ghosts of her past, a reminder that she was dirty, tainted.

Shower, thought Satsuki desperately as she stood to move towards her dresser. The alcohol in her system caused her to sway as she stood, and she cursed her weakness while vehemently muttering "pathetic" under her breath. Through the numb haze of her intoxication, she managed to make it to the bathroom and turn on the water in her shower, but her misery was far from over as her stomach lurched and she suddenly found herself on her knees in front of the toilet, vomiting up the vodka from mere hours before.

This time, the burning of the alcohol and stomach acid being expelled from her mouth seemed to ground her, temporarily replacing the remnants of the flashback of her first encounter with Ragyo after being captured. Tears filled her eyes as she gagged until the vomiting turned into dry heaves, and the dry heaves turned into nothing. Satsuki rested her head on the toilet seat for a few minutes until the world seemed to stop spinning, then stripped off the rest of her clothes and stepped into the humid shower, steam rising around her as warm water washed away the aches of throwing up. After lazily soaping herself up and rinsing herself off, she sat on the floor of the shower with her knees pulled to her chest, wallowing in the water. Drops of water continued to pelt her but she

barely noticed as her eyes glazed over and she allowed her mind to turn off, if only for a little while.

After exiting the shower and pulling on her favorite robe, Satsuki had made her way back to her bed, where she sat in the same spot as before. She stared at the wall blankly and began reflecting on how she had allowed herself to get to this point.

Defeating her mother and the life fibers had been satisfying to say the least, but a feeling Satsuki could not describe had settled in her chest since that day, a feeling that was both hollow and heavy. She had found it more difficult to socialize with her friends as the weeks went on and had begun to decline the offers from her friends and her sister to hang out. Perhaps it was the sense of pointlessness that she found in the gatherings; as much as she loved her friends, their idle banter and ease of transitioning to peacetime baffled Satsuki. Did they not have goals to achieve? Things to do? But then again, she too found herself without a plan for the future but did not know how to cope with it. She wasn't sure if it was the fact that her whole life had led up to a single culminating moment, a moment in which her sense of purpose had been extinguished as easily as a candle in a windstorm, but she found it hard to relate to them.

A lack of purpose had Satsuki feeling worthless, and while she yearned to be as prominent and powerful as she had been as Student Council President, she no longer had the ambition without a goal in front of her. Instead, she had allowed herself to isolate herself more and more frequently, and her evasive behaviors in the face of invitations had turned into flat out ignoring texts and calls. Though she had stopped keeping track of how long it had been since she had left the house, Satsuki reckoned it must have been at least two weeks since she had had any contact with anyone. Taking a different bottle of liquor each night from the manor's cellar had become her new routine, and despite the fact that she did not leave her home, her room was filled with the empty bottles she couldn't be bothered to pick up in her endless free time, scattered about like the fragments of her aching heart.

Finding that she could not sleep, Satsuki made her way to the kitchen through the empty manor and set a kettle on the stove. How she craved the comfort of Soroi's ever-reassuring presence; she was beginning to regret sending him and all other manor employees on an extended vacation to repay them for their service.

As the clock on the stove changed to 3:11AM, the kettle began to wail, piercing through her drowsy and still slightly intoxicated state. She jumped slightly before quickly removing the kettle from the stove and pouring the scalding liquid into her favorite teacup. As the liquid began turning amber in color, Satsuki inhaled the familiar scent and closed her eyes, basking in the comfort it brought. Taking her first sip, she felt the warmth of the liquid spread from her chest to her limbs, filling her with a fleeting sense of the best part of her past. She finished the cup and walked only somewhat unsteadily back to her darkened bedroom before slipping under the covers of her bed and falling asleep instantly, the stresses of the previous hours earning her a much appreciated reprieve from her nightmares.

Chapter 2

Life for Satsuki went on like this for another two weeks; her days consisted of aimlessly wandering the halls of the manor, occasionally punctuated by food breaks or hygiene needs. Her face had taken on a gaunt look; her pale skin had become even paler and the bags under her eyes took on a darkness she had not thought possible. The hollow feeling in her chest was becoming more pressing, but she learned to ignore it as easily as she ignored her friends' worried voicemails and texts. She had taken to drinking earlier in the day, and the bottles she normally opened around dinner now found themselves half empty by lunchtime. The nightmares were still a nightly occurrence, though the alcohol seemed to allow her to sleep for longer periods of time between flashbacks of being tortured by her mother.

Today's post-shower drink of choice was a green liquor that she hadn't even bothered to read the label of; she was so spaced out that she had picked the closest bottle to the stairs, the exhaustion of her life of monotony impairing her more than the alcohols of the past month had. Sitting on the edge of her bed as usual, she robotically opened the bottle and took a few swigs of the anise flavored drink. Pondering the flavor, Satsuki took a few more gulps of the spirits. A nagging feeling began to press at the back of her mind and she had a vague feeling that something was wrong, that she was forgetting something vital, but was snapped out of her reverie by her phone ringing.

She glanced at her cell phone as it illuminated her room with a light blue glow and found Ryuko's name flashing across the screen. Hesitantly she reached for the mobile phone, fingers brushing the plastic as she danced with the idea of answering. However, she had debated for too long, and the phone went dark once again, leaving Satsuki in the near darkness of her room.

As she withdrew her hand, she realized something was seriously wrong; her arm seemed to be moving in slow motion, rippling in front of her vision as if she were looking at a reflection of her view in the crystal clear surface of water recently disturbed. Baffled, she turned her head to the half empty bottle lying against her pillow but nearly fell over from the feeling of disorientation the rapid motion had caused. While reaching towards the bottle again after the dizziness had subsided slightly, Satsuki heard a loud pounding coming from somewhere in the manor. The sound was distorted, as if her head were submerged underwater. Panicking slightly, she grabbed for the bottle but the motion triggered something within her. As her hand wrapped around the glass container, flashes of the past began to become her reality, flickering in and out like a faulty light bulb, until she was transported back to Honnouji Academy.

Her arms reached out futilely to attempt to block the blows that her mother was dealing to her face as she clutched Bakuzan desperately, pain shooting up her arm as she squeezed its hilt with near-superhuman strength. Ragyo easily evaded Satsuki's outstretched arms, landing punch after punch to Satsuki's face, the sounds of which seemed to have synced with the noises she had heard before the flashback. A well-aimed, particularly loud blow to Satsuki's stomach had her coughing up blood. As the warm, metallic tasting liquid threatened to choke her, Satsuki pushed her rising fear of suffocation down before bringing Bakuzan down in an arcing sweep. Ragyo's fist alone broke the blade, and Satsuki's surprise at the turn of events allowed her mother to pound her fist into Satsuki's stomach once again, causing blood to pour from her mouth. Pain coursed through Satsuki's body, though she wasn't sure if it was real or not. As Ragyo gripped Satsuki's neck and caressed her barely covered womanhood over Junketsu, a loud blast transported her suddenly back to her dark room.

Somehow she had managed to wedge herself into a corner of her bedroom, surrounded by bottles

that now laid in pieces around her. Gasping, Satsuki gulped down air, but an intense feeling of anxiety washed over her. Her limbs and lips began to tingle and become numb as her breathing became faster and shallower until the loud wheezing was all she could hear. Darkness began to close in on her vision, but she managed to glance at the hand that had held Bakuzan in the flashback and the bottle in real life.

Glass shards, imbedded so far into her palm that they had managed to break through the skin on the back of her hand, shone in the light from the digital clock. Her breathing grew faster and her vision grew darker until all she could see was her hand gushing blood and a flash of a familiar red streak, before she slipped out of consciousness.

Chapter 3

In a never-ending void of blackness, Satsuki found herself floating on her back. She was completely naked, and despite the fact that her surroundings were completely black, she was able to see herself as though she herself were alit. She mused that perhaps the Kiryuin radiance was not only intimidating but also practical. Though her body did not feel temperature or pain, she registered that she seemed to be moving, as if she were floating down an imperceptible stream towards and away from nothingness. Her mind was at ease for once, and she allowed herself to enjoy the peace while she could. She floated for what seemed like hours, days, maybe even weeks, as time seemed to be nonexistent here, but she didn't mind. She closed her eyes and let herself drift indefinitely until she felt the first physical feeling she had experienced in this void: pain.

It started slowly at first, a dull throbbing that she tried to ignore, but the pain became sharper and began to shoot up her arm. Lifting her right arm in front of her eyes, she found her hand completely unharmed, though the pain persisted. Another sensation returned: pressure. Pressure in her chest, in her throat, around her left hand.

I don't want to leave here. I don't want to feel anything anymore. This world does not need such a weak being, she thought, but even then another sensation assaulted her body: temperature. She felt incredibly cold, though her left hand detected something soft and warm encircling it, a source of comfort despite her inability to identify it. She continued floating in the void, experiencing these physical feelings, until she found herself moving towards a dull red light. It seemed to be only a pinprick in the distance, an unreachable destination no matter how long she glided, galaxies away. The pressure on her left hand became more insistent, and suddenly she found herself standing on the shore of a beautiful beach.

White sand stretched for miles on both sides of her, flanked by beautiful, crystal clear blue water. The beauty of the landscape was not lost on Satsuki. *I could stay here. It's not like I have anywhere to be.* Yet even as the thought passed through her mind, a red doorway appeared on the beach. Curious, Satsuki moved towards it, the sun shining brightly on her pale skin. She found that the door was standing independently on the sand, and she circled it to see the back, but was confused to find it looked identical to the front. The closer Satsuki came to the door, the more insistent the pressure on her left hand became. Deciding to explore the door later, she walked towards the water, which was a comfortably warm temperature. She walked about waist deep into the water and then stopped, squatting until the water was up to her neck. *Where was I before this? What happened to me? And why does my right hand hurt so much?*

Satsuki pondered her situation, letting her thoughts drift through her mind as easily as she had drifted through the ethereal abyss. *I want to stay here, but that doorway...it seems to be calling me,* she considered, before realizing her left hand had risen above the water and seemed to be reaching for the door. She decided to see what would happen if she followed her arm. The instant she stood up from the water she found herself mere inches from the door, fingers lightly brushing the knob. The pressure in her left hand became stronger, as did the pressure in her throat. *It's now or never,* she decided, and gripped the doorknob forcefully with her left hand before wrenching it open and stepping through.

Chapter 4

Satsuki immediately regretted her decision as she found herself feeling groggy, in pain, and back in darkness. Dull murmuring filled her ears but she could not understand anything that was being said. Her right hand hurt incredibly so, and her throat felt like it was completely blocked, despite the rhythmic movements of her chest. Regardless of the pain and unfamiliar sensations, she felt relatively calm. Failing to muster the strength to open her eyes, Satsuki decided to focus the little attention she could on picking out sounds around her through the haze of her current state. Besides the mumbling, she thought she picked up a rhythmic whooshing noise along with a high pitched beeping noise. Satsuki felt like she was swimming through a sea of molasses; no matter how much she struggled her mind did not seem to be able to break free from the haze surrounding it. A stinging sensation suddenly made its way up her left arm from her elbow and the pain in her right arm dissipated. Unfortunately, with the relief of the pain came the drowsiness, blanketing her in darkness until she succumbed to unconsciousness once again.

Hours later, when her mind broke through the fuzziness that followed her unconsciousness, Satsuki found that she was able to move her eyes in their sockets while her lids remained closed. Bolstered by this feat, she began trying to open her eyes. Her lids fluttered for a few seconds before opening half way. Her surroundings were so white that she found her eyes blinking sluggishly to try to adjust to the sudden transition. When her eyes were able to focus, she looked straight ahead at a white ceiling. Fluorescent lights illuminated the room along with the sunlight filtering in from the window on her right. Satsuki stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, exhausted by the effort it had taken to simply open and focus her eyes. She contemplated going back to sleep, but curiosity was egging her on, begging her to get a better grasp of where she was and what was going on. Satsuki lowered her eyes and was able to see a digital clock on the wall, its black numbers proclaiming the time to be 5:17PM. Next to the clock was a whiteboard with both her own name and a few names she did not recognize scrawled upon it sloppily and in multiple colors; attempting to read the smudged board any further was giving Satsuki a headache, so she averted her eyes to her right.

The window's curtains were open but Satsuki immediately noted that the window itself had no way of being opened. A sense of dread filled her, and the beeping that she had managed to ignore until now became more rapid, synced with the sound of her own pulse in her ears. *Heart monitor, probably*, she thought, becoming more relaxed upon realizing it was not a bomb or something of the like. *Then that means hospital*, she deduced. Deciding her best course of action would be to alert someone that she was awake so that they could fill her in on what happened, Satsuki attempted to speak but nothing happened. Her lips moved but she realized that something was impeding her mouth, and she suddenly became hyperaware of the device shoved down her throat. She couldn't swallow, speak, or even lick her lips around it. Frustrated by this development, her new plan was to take the tube OUT of her mouth RIGHT NOW, but as her left hand, no longer impeded by the pressure she'd felt while on the beach, lifted upwards and towards her mouth it abruptly stopped at waist level. Perplexed, Satsuki managed to angle her head downward enough to see her hand across the white expanse of the bed sheet and was surprised to find that her wrist was encircled by a blue material which was tied somewhere under her bed. *W-What? Why is my arm tied down?* She began pulling against the restraint, but it proved futile as the restraints refused to budge. *Use your right hand to take it off*, suggested the voice in the back of her head before the panic could set in. Satsuki lifted her right arm but received the same results. Both of her arms were tied to the bed frame, and thick bandages were wrapped around her right hand. *I'm being held prisoner? But why?*

Frantically, she began tugging both her arms until the rising panic at her predicament reared its ugly head. She would have screamed if she could have, but the tube forcing air in and out of her

lungs prevented the use of her vocal cords. A cold sweat broke out over her body as her diaphragm fought against the motions being regulated by the ventilator, causing her to gag. The bindings around her wrists felt too familiar, too painful, careening her back to her days in the cage as she hung helplessly as her mother raped and tortured her repeatedly and seemingly endlessly. Satsuki's back arched off the bed as her panic attack gained momentum and she lost track of reality until suddenly the warm pressure around her hand returned, grounding her, and she let her body collapse against the mattress, shaking violently as her vision returned to the hospital room ceiling instead of the iron bars that had trapped her for so long. Her stomach heaved as she tried to relax and allow the breathing machine to do its work, struggling until a frightened voice next to her whispered "Nee-san."

Satsuki froze and turned to her head to the left to find Ryuko staring back at her, concern evident in her eyes. "H-hold on, I'll call a nurse," she stammered, shaken by her sister's behavior. Ryuko disappeared momentarily, returning with a plump, blonde nurse in dark blue scrubs who was listening to Ryuko babbling.

"I just got back from grabbing a coffee and she was all pale and sweaty and her body was moving like she was possessed or some shit! And her eyes were rolling back in her head, it was freaky as hell. When I touched her hand though she went back to how she is right now," Ryuko explained, cocking her head in Satsuki's direction. Satsuki eyed the nurse warily as she moved towards her.

"Hello Satsuki, my name is Kimiko, I am your nurse today," she explained in a soothing voice that put Satsuki at ease as the woman began assessing her vital signs. "You are at Honnouji Hospital right now, it seems you had a bad accident at your home and your sister found you in time to get you the help you needed. She can tell you that story if you'd like, while I go alert the doctor that you're finally awake." Satsuki nodded, but then lifted her left arm against the restraint as if to ask why it was in place. Catching on quickly, Kimiko answered, "These are a form of restraint we use for patients like yourself that are on ventilators, that big machine on your right. Its purpose is to ensure that you don't displace the tubes, either on accident or purposely." Looking frustrated, Satsuki shook her head and sent a half-hearted glare to the nurse before jerking her arm once more and staring at the nurse expectantly. "Unfortunately, it is hospital policy that only the doctor can determine whether you are well enough for the restraints to be removed, so if you'd allow me to go call him right now, the sooner he can get here." Satisfied, Satsuki nodded, and the nurse exited the room while pulling a phone from her pocket.

Glad that the mystery of her location was solved, something that Kimiko had said stuck out in Satsuki's mind. *'You're finally awake,' she'd said. What did she mean by finally? How long have I been here?* Satsuki looked pointedly at Ryuko, who had returned to the chair alongside Satsuki's bed. She moved her gaze to the clock, then back at Ryuko, then back to the clock, before finally returning to Ryuko's cobalt eyes. Ryuko looked uncomfortable and averted her gaze before murmuring, "You've been unconscious for five days. I was starting to think you'd never wake up." Incredulous, Satsuki opened her left hand and moved it the few inches she could towards Ryuko, who seemed to understand her intent as she grasped her sister's hand. Satsuki's expectant expression encouraged Ryuko to begin recounting the events of the past five days.

"All of us were worried about you, since it had been, like, a month since you last answered anybody's texts. The Elites were concerned but figured you needed space or some shit. After a month with no contact I figured I'd ask Iori if his uncle had mentioned anything about your whereabouts, but when Iori told me your butler was on some crazy extended vacation, I knew something was up. I tried to convince your student council nerds to come with me to the manor but they told me you had forbid them from doing so without explicit permission, and since you wouldn't answer a stupid text message, they refused," she growled, frustrated with both the Elites' refusal and Satsuki's antisocial behavior. "Well, anyways, I figured I would just come and knock

and see what the hell you were doing. I swear I knocked on your damn door for like, twenty whole minutes. My hand was fucking killing me. Suddenly I got this bad feeling, so I kicked the door in.” She sheepishly rubbed the back of her neck. “Sorry about that. I’d say I’d pay to fix it but you’re the one with all the money, nee-san,” she said, smiling at her own cleverness (which in reality was not that clever but Ryuko would insist otherwise).

Satsuki rolled her eyes at her sister’s comment but could not hide the small amount of amusement that her eyes displayed. “By the way, your house is huge as hell. I felt like I was in a damn maze trying to find you in there. I must have passed the kitchen, like, six times. You need a fucking map in there, like the kind at amusement parks that say ‘you are here’ so that nobody gets lost forever.” A gentle squeeze from Satsuki’s hand reminded Ryuko that she had digressed, prompting her to continue. “So, I finally find your room, right? And it’s dark as hell in there and I couldn’t see shit but I could hear this crazy demon breathing. I swear I almost lost my shit until I found the light switch. When I turned it on I saw the top of your head on the other side of the bed and all this broken glass all over your floor,” Ryuko reported, her gaze turning dark at the memory. “You were in the corner still hyperventilating or whatever, and I came around the bed and you were completely naked and covered in blood, holding onto yourself in the fetal position. Your robe was in a ball next to you, all torn up. Your legs looked like you tried to crawl on your floor over all those glass shards. You got some pretty bad cuts on your shins but only a few needed stitches. The worst was your hand.” Ryuko gestured vaguely to Satsuki’s bandaged hand. “It looked like you got in a fight with a glass bottle and both of you lost. Like, this huge ass piece of glass was straight up coming out the back of your hand and blood was gushing out of it. It was sick as hell. I called an ambulance but you were still shaking and breathing weird and then you passed out. The doctors said you lost a lot of blood and they had to give you three transfusions. I’m not good at all that medical stuff, they can explain it better than I can,” she finished lamely, before giving Satsuki a sympathetic look. “Why didn’t you tell me things had gotten so bad?”

Satsuki felt her stomach drop with guilt, but any response she could have given was cut short by the entrance of a tall, dark skinned man with jet-black hair and thick rimmed glasses. His lab coat was askew, as if he had pulled it on while running down the hallway, though Satsuki mused that that was probably exactly what had happened. “Ahh, Miss Kiryuin, it’s good to finally see you back in the land of the living. How are you feeling?” he inquired, raising an eyebrow. Satsuki nodded once, and the doctor continued speaking. “You gave us all quite a scare. The alcohol you drank was so potent that it, coupled with the blood loss you experienced from your injuries, sent you into respiratory arrest, which is why we have this machine breathing for you. The blood transfusions we gave you have stabilized your hemoglobin levels, but we will continue to monitor your labs for signs of infection. Also, based on the symptoms your sister described to me, I’d like to get a psych consult before you are discharged from the hospital.” Satsuki’s heart rate audibly sped up as the machine beeping rapidly next to her betrayed the stoic expression she was trying to project. “I understand that this sounds like an uncomfortable thing, but your safety is the priority. The psychiatrist will ask you some questions and determine whether or not further psychiatric treatment will be necessary. We would like to prevent episodes like this from happening again. Does that sound reasonable?” Satsuki shrugged, avoiding his gaze. “We will begin attempting to wean you from the ventilator tomorrow. If your body can properly oxygenate itself without mechanical intervention, you should be out of here within the next week. As for your right hand, the glass shard that impaled it was removed successfully without any nerve or tendon damage, but it did slice open an artery, which contributed to your blood loss. It was repaired in the OR but you’ll likely need a couple months of physical therapy to regain full function. If that’s all for now, I’ll be on my way. I have a surgery in an hour that I must prep for,” he announced, rocking forward onto the balls of his feet.

Satsuki’s left arm shot forward to grab his attention before he could turn away, then repeated the

jerking motion against the restraints, a hopeful look in her eyes. A hesitant look crossed over his face, but he quickly hid it behind his professional demeanor. He sighed, pushing up his glasses, then stated, "Typically, we leave the patient in restraints until the ventilator is out or we are certain the patient will pose no trouble. It's not that I think you will cause trouble, but I feel it would be best if we kept those on for now. Perhaps tomorrow we can reevaluate, alright?" Satsuki's nonverbal answers came in the form of an elevated heart rate and a panicked look in her eyes, her arms straining with all their might against the restraints until the bandages enveloping her right hand became saturated with blood, spreading as quickly as Satsuki's panic. Sensing her distress, the doctor moved to her right side and grabbed her forearm gently, hoping to stop her from causing more damage.

"How about a compromise, then? I will take the restraint off of your right arm, that way you don't hurt it anymore by struggling. Your fingers are splinted under the bandages, so your hand is basically useless at this point, so it would be difficult to dislodge the tube. How does that sound?" Satsuki nodded fervently, eager to be able to move her arm again. His callused hands unclipped the restraint and freed her right arm, and Satsuki would have sighed in relief if her airway had been under her own control. "Alright then, I'll be on my way. Kimiko, could you change that bandage before the end of your shift? I must get to the OR as soon as possible. Thanks!" he exclaimed, nearly running into the door in his haste to exit the room.

"What a busy man, always on the run," Kimiko mused as she walked over to Satsuki's right side. "Let's take a look at that hand then, alright?" Satsuki nodded, but became aware of the increasing pain in her bleeding hand and could not hide her flinch as the nurse gently grabbed her wrist. "Ahh! You probably hurt it trying to break out of those restraints! I'll bring you some pain medicine before I get to work on your bandages, that way you'll be more comfortable." She bustled out of the room but returned in a minute with a syringe in her hand. "This is Dilaudid, it is such a powerful painkiller that you should feel almost instant relief when I administer it," she explained as she twisted it into the IV port connected to Satsuki's left arm. Once the pain medication was injected, Satsuki began to feel like she was floating, and did not even notice as her nurse quickly cleaned and re-banded her hand.

"Alright girls, it's nearly 7:00PM, which is when my shift ends," she reported while obtaining a new set of vitals from Satsuki. "Unfortunately, visiting hours end at 7:00 too, so Ryuko, you'll have to go home again for the night."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," grumbled Ryuko, but she released Satsuki's hand and began cleaning up the snack wrappers and empty coffee cups that littered the room. Smiling brightly, Kimiko relayed the fact that she would be coming back at 7:00 in the morning for her next shift, and Satsuki was too spaced out to notice the appreciative glance Ryuko had given to the nurse at that statement.

"Goodnight, girls! See you tomorrow!" Satsuki gave a small wave with her now mobile arm before falling into a drug-induced sleep.

Chapter 5

Satsuki managed to make it through the night without any nightmares, though this was likely due to the painkillers knocking her out and her new nurse entering and exiting the room every two hours to obtain a new set of vitals. Despite the lack of sleep, Satsuki felt rested upon waking for the first time in a long time. The morning went by quickly for Satsuki, who was looking forward to getting the breathing tube out of her throat and then getting the hell out of this hospital. She wasn't sure she could endure the embarrassment of another sponge bath or having to use a bedpan when nature called. Ryuko returned to Satsuki's room around 11:00AM and only had the chance to converse with Satsuki for a few minutes before the doctor from yesterday entered the room, followed by Kimiko.

"Good morning, Miss Kiryuin. I trust you are doing well this morning?" Satsuki nodded at his inquiry, and he continued. "We are going to conduct a spontaneous breathing trial, or SBT. Basically, we are going to turn off the breathing machine and see if you are able to breathe on your own. It may be uncomfortable for your breathing muscles in the same way that you may feel when exercising the first time after not working out for an extended period of time. We will keep the machine off for up to 15 minutes while we monitor your heart rate, breathing rate and effort, and oxygenation status. If you tolerate it well, you may be able to have that tube taken out by the end of the night." He paused to scratch behind his ear, then reported, "It is not uncommon for patients to fail the SBT the first time, so try not to be disappointed if it doesn't go well this time; we will simply try again later in the day if that is the case. Are you ready?" Satsuki nodded as Kimiko whispered something in Ryuko's ear; immediately after pulling away, Ryuko gripped Satsuki's hand in support.

"Alrighty then, here we go. Kimiko, sit Satsuki up and then decrease the supplemental oxygen levels to half of what it is right now. Check her oxygenation status after 30 seconds." Kimiko complied, pressing buttons on the touch screen panel and then glancing at her watch. "O2 levels are stable at 97% on half of her supplemental oxygen. Do you wish to turn off the oxygen completely?" The doctor nodded, watching Satsuki's heart monitor for danger signs. "Oxygen is completely off," Kimiko informed the doctor, who gave a quick nod. The room was silent as the medical professionals examined the monitors for signs of distress, but the only change was a minor increase in heart rate.

"Okay, commence the SBT. Satsuki, we are turning the machine off now. If you feel dizzy, lightheaded, or too tired to continue, please raise your right hand, and we will turn the ventilator back on, so remain calm." A few beeps sounded as the machine ceased its rhythmic pumping. Instantly, Ryuko noticed that Satsuki's grip on her hand became much stronger. As Satsuki attempted to work her diaphragm to move air in and out of her lungs, she felt as though she had been punched in the stomach and had the wind knocked out of her. She struggled to bring in air, wheezing slightly through the tube. *Come on, Satsuki, it's just breathing. You've done things 200 times harder than this! Just breathe like you have for the past 18 years of your life. In, out, In, out. Fuck, come ON, this shouldn't be this difficult!* Finally, her diaphragm seemed to kick start like an old engine firing back up after years of disuse: clumsily. Her breathing was erratic and irregular, but she was breathing on her own. Unfortunately for her, the strain of the test was becoming too much for her. The heart monitor began alarming furiously along with the pulse oxygenation sensor. Kimiko glanced back at the doctor. He waited a few seconds before nodding, and she powered up the machine, taking over for Satsuki's confused and exhausted breathing muscles.

Frustrated tears pooled in Satsuki's eyes. *I literally failed a breathing test. I endured years of abuse, a month hanging in a cage, and a battle against an alien race, and now I'm a worthless*

piece of shit who can't even breathe on her own! Why me?! Satsuki flinched as Kimiko placed a hand on her shoulder sympathetically but relaxed into the touch after a few seconds of stiffness. The doctor spoke up. "No need to worry, my dear. Like I said, it's very rare to pass on the first try. We can try again around 4:00, okay?" Satsuki deflated, unable to argue anyway, and the doctor left the room.

Ryuko, who had been holding her breath the whole time, hissed as she removed her hand from Satsuki's iron grip, bruises already forming. "Jesus, nee-san, you nearly broke my hand!" she cried as she shook her hand. Satsuki glared at her dejectedly, and Ryuko's hands came up defensively in front of her. "Woah woah, relax, I'm just trying to lighten the mood. I'm gonna go grab lunch while you cool off...and maybe find some fucking ice for my fucking hand," she added under her breath before sauntering out of the room.

Alone with Satsuki, Kimiko walked over to the door of Satsuki's room and closed it before returning to Ryuko's vacant chair. Satsuki watched curiously as the nurse kindly grabbed her restrained hand. "Listen. I know you're unable to respond right now, which makes it sort of unfair that I'm bringing this up, but just hear me out. We nurses are trained to pick up certain behaviors... indicators, if you will. I don't know much about you, Satsuki, but it is evident that you have had a rough past, and the signs you display indicate to me that you may have been abused for a long time." Satsuki jerked her head to the right, away from Kimiko's concerned face, as anxiety began to set in. She had never told anyone of her mother's abuse, not even her sister, and for this woman to pick up on it after seeing her awake for less than 24 hours was terrifying to Satsuki. She began to tremble slightly, squeezing her eyes shut to hide the tears that were threatening to spill. Kimiko caringly stroked Satsuki's forearm in an attempt to calm her.

"It's better to get this part out of the way before the psychiatrist drops it on you, you know? It can be hard to share parts of yourself like that with others, let alone strangers, but the first thing that the therapist will assess is your support system. It's okay to rely on people. It's okay to discuss it with those you love. It's okay to cry," she affirmed, and something within Satsuki broke. Tears began streaming down her face, her lower jaw quivering with the weight of the cries she could not release. Her face flushed red, the room suddenly too warm to contain her. Kimiko pulled back Satsuki's blankets, exposing her hospital gown clad body to the cooler temperature of the room. The nurse bustled to the other side of Satsuki's bed, adjusting the ventilator so that it only breathed for Satsuki every 20 seconds, and suddenly her stomach clenched as her own body compensated for the lack of mechanical intervention. Body-shuddering breaths, the only way she could cry with her vocal cords compressed by the tube, filled the room as she forced air in and out of her lungs through the tube. The deep whooshing sounds filled the room as Satsuki cried silently, punctuated occasionally by a hiss from the ventilator.

Satsuki leaned forward from her upright position, bringing her knees up and resting her right arm across them, and placed her forehead on her forearm, crying into herself. Kimiko rubbed her bare back soothingly between the gaps in the hospital gown as Satsuki sobbed. Satsuki appreciated the gesture, despite her discomfort at being touched on her back; she realized that these hands were not meant to harm but rather to heal. For half an hour, Satsuki cried desperately as she purged herself of years of pent-up emotions. As her weeping began to subside, the nurse grabbed some tissues so she could dry her eyes for her. Thoroughly fatigued, Satsuki laid back in her bed, face red and swollen.

"I'll let you recover for a bit before the next SBT, but if you need anything in the mean time push this button," she murmured, placing a controller under Satsuki's restrained hand before tucking her in and placing a cool wash cloth on her forehead. "Do you want me to keep your sister out as well?" Completely drained, Satsuki nodded before drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 6

As promised, everyone was present at 4:00 for Satsuki's next attempt at breathing on her own. Fortunately, it seemed that the outpouring of emotion earlier had been the warm-up her breathing muscles needed to get back to work, not to mention the fact that the machine was only breathing for her three times a minute at this point.

"Since you've been weaned off this much, we will turn the machine off and see if you can make it the full 15 minutes without difficulties. Let's do this." As the ventilator went silent, Satsuki continued to breathe normally. After 15 minutes, Kimiko smiled and exclaimed, "You passed!"

Satsuki smiled around the tube as best she could, ready for it to be taken out as soon as possible. The doctor pulled on a pair of gloves as the nurse dug around in her pocket for an empty syringe. "Here's what I'm going to do. The tube has a balloon on the end that is inflated. We are going to deflate the balloon with this syringe and then pull the tube out. It's best to exhale as the tube comes out. Whatever you do, don't hold your breath or we won't be able to remove it. Understand?" A curt nod from Satsuki was the doctor's cue to grip the tube firmly as Kimiko deflated the balloon with the syringe.

"Okay, on the count of three. One, two, three!" he cried, pulling the tube out of her throat as she gagged and struggled not to cough. The nurse removed the restraint from Satsuki's left hand as Satsuki coughed uncomfortably. "It's best to rest your voice for a while to prevent vocal cord damage, so try not to strain yourself. The psychiatrist will be in here tomorrow morning to assess you, and if all is well and you are able to keep down fluids and food, you can go home afterwards. Sound like a deal?" he asked as he tossed the tube into the trash, eyebrow raised. Satsuki grunted, grateful to be able to make verbal sounds but less than overjoyed at the prospect of the visit from the psychiatrist. The doctor and the nurse reviewed her vital signs before leaving Satsuki and Ryuko alone in the room.

"How does it feel to have that shit out of your throat?" Ryuko asked as Satsuki sipped on a glass of water that Ryuko had brought up from the cafeteria earlier. Satsuki cleared her throat experimentally before croaking out, "Better. Want to eat, too." She'd lost weight while in her coma, giving her a particularly gaunt look. "Best to take it slow I think," Ryuko reasoned. Satsuki shrugged, wishing for a fleeting second that their roles were switched so that she would be taking care of Ryuko, but quickly pushed the thought out of her head.

Clearing her throat after a few minutes, Ryuko broke the silence. "Do you, like, wanna talk about it? I mean only if you want to, of course. I don't want to push you." Satsuki merely shook her head tiredly, rasping out weakly, "Not today. Too much."

"Ahh right, I forgot about the whole 'resting your voice' thing. Well, do you wanna play a game or something? Or I could just talk about all the shit that's happened since you lost contact with us. Or I could just sit here. It's whatever," she finished lamely, rubbing the back of her neck. Not feeling up for a game nor silence, Satsuki murmured, "Talk," and Ryuko rambled on for the next two hours about anything and everything while Satsuki continued to sip her water and eat the Jell-O that Kimiko had delivered. She was only half listening to what Ryuko was animatedly relaying to her and grunting at appropriate times in the conversation. At the end of visiting hours and shift change, Ryuko and Kimiko said their goodbyes to Satsuki before departing together and Satsuki fell into a fitful sleep, anxiety about the morning gnawing at her along with her hunger.

Chapter 7

Breakfast consisted of some shitty hospital-style cream of wheat and a few pieces of toast. Satsuki was glad that she had graduated up to solid foods but was only shoveling the food down her throat because she knew it was required for her to be discharged. In addition to this, the psychiatrist was scheduled to be here in 10 minutes, and Satsuki's restlessness was only slightly abated by eating voraciously. Worse, Ryuko hadn't even stopped by yet today, and Satsuki found herself craving the security that her hand in her sister's brought her. Little did she know that Ryuko was down the hall at the nurses' station, drumming her fingers on the counter in annoyance as she waited to intercept her sister's next visitor. Kimiko had told her the day before that the psychiatrist was a woman of average build, with long brown hair, a coffee cup always in hand, and a tendency to wear pencil skirts every day. Ryuko's head whipped around for the tenth time that morning at the sound of an elevator dinging and was finally rewarded when the woman in question stepped out of the elevator and walked in the direction of the nurses' station. Dodging doctors and visitors alike, Ryuko made a beeline for the psychiatrist, grabbing her arm and pulling the startled woman into an empty on call room.

"Are you Dr. Mahmoud?" she asked roughly, but devoid of menace. The woman, speechless, simply nodded as she observed the young girl in front of her. "I need to talk to you about something. You're about to go talk to my sister and, well, she's the only family I have left. I just don't want...things have been...she shouldn't...FUCK sorry I'm not good with words," she admitted. "I know some shit went on in her past but no one knows exactly what happened. Knowing her, she won't tell you anything about it, but I want you to teach me the warning signs for when she's getting bad again so she doesn't get hurt like this." As Ryuko described to the doctor what had landed Satsuki in the hospital and her behavior preceding it, the doctor nodded, taking notes in a personal notebook that she'd pulled from her bag. Meanwhile, Satsuki was anxiously biting the nails of her left hand and jiggling her leg up and down in anticipation. Finally, her door opened and a woman entered, and Satsuki resolved herself to show no weakness in front of her.

An hour later, a frustrated psychiatrist walked out of Satsuki's hospital room, having failed to obtain any information on Satsuki's past or what had caused her to turn to alcohol to control the pain. Grumbling under her breath as she unceremoniously shoved some papers into her folder, she walked briskly to the conference room, where Satsuki's nurse and doctor followed. Curious, Ryuko (who had been unsuccessfully trying to eavesdrop on the "therapy session" for the past hour) followed Dr. Mahmoud to the doorway of the conference room, remaining out of sight. As the door to the room closed, Ryuko stuck her toes into the doorway, leaving a crack just wide enough for her to hear the medical professionals' voices filtering through. They talked for a few minutes about their own lives, catching up with each other while Ryuko nabbed a chair from down the hall and set it down next to the crack in the door. Leaning her ear towards the door, she listened for a while, zoning out until her sister's name being spoken snapped her out of her reverie.

The psychiatrist began talking about the session she'd just left as the doctor and the nurse listened intently. "It is clear to me that Satsuki has endured a traumatic past. Her defense mechanisms are perfectly honed to protect her from anything that she perceives to be a weakness. She would not tell me anything, despite my open-ended approach. It was as though she could see right through my attempts at getting her to open up and averted them expertly. For these behaviors to be so well-developed suggests that she has had years to perfect them. It is likely that whatever she experienced, it has been going on for most of her life."

Ryuko paled as she listened to Dr. Mahmoud's descriptions. What could have been so bad that Satsuki closed herself up completely? Intent on learning more, Ryuko scooted the chair closer to the crack, getting as close to it as she dared.

Kimiko then reported, "Yesterday I confronted Satsuki while she was still intubated and unable to respond. In my professional opinion, Satsuki exhibits signs of child abuse at the very least. It seems that when she cannot control the situation, like when she could not speak, she is more likely to be vulnerable. I told her I suspected abuse and afterwards she ended up crying for over half an hour. The trauma she must have faced must have been extreme," she finished. Ryuko cursed under her breath. No wonder Kimiko kept her out of Satsuki's room yesterday.

The dark haired doctor finally spoke. "Given her history, I would consider admitting her inpatient, but we cannot do so lawfully unless she is a true danger to herself or others. Taking into account that she has not demonstrated any suicidal or homicidal behaviors, as far as we've seen at least, we cannot admit her. I doubt she'd voluntarily admit herself, which means we have to discharge her; we can't keep her here any longer. She will need therapy for that hand, so I think it would be best to check up on her weekly at her physical therapy sessions. She will also not be able to live alone until her hand is semi-functional, so we need to make sure someone is caring for her while she's home. This is a difficult case, but there's not much we can do," he proclaimed, adjusting his glasses.

They were interrupted by a sneeze that was much too close to the door for them to ignore. Dr. Mahmoud rolled her eyes as she sipped from her now cold cup of coffee before turning to the door and asking, "Ryuko, would you like to join us?" Behind the closed door, the doctors heard a chair scuffing, followed by a loud thud and an even louder "FUCK!" as Ryuko, in her embarrassment at being discovered and her haste to get into the room, tripped over the chair and landed flat on her face. She pushed the door open awkwardly, rubbing her sore nose. Sheepishly, she started, "S-Sorry, I was just--" but was interrupted by the psychiatrist.

"It's no problem; you're her family so you should be included in her plan of care. As you probably heard, we're having difficulties trying to decide how to make sure your sister gets the best care without jeopardizing herself or her health again."

Ryuko rubbed her chin as she spun the office chair she was now seated in, pondering for a minute, then determinedly turned to her sister's caretakers with a serious look in her eyes. "If Satsuki needs someone to stay with her at home to take care of her, I can do it. I can make sure she is being fed and not getting into alcohol anymore. Show me how to change her bandages. If she starts to get bad again, Dr. Mahmoud already taught me the signs to look for, and I can report them to you when I bring her to physical therapy, in private if necessary, because Satsuki would kill me if she found out I was 'spying' on her."

"That is an excellent idea, Ryuko!" bubbled Kimiko, proud that Ryuko was willing to step up in hard times. She'd grown fond of the girl in the past week that Ryuko had camped out daily by Satsuki's side. As the doctor began the process of discharging Satsuki, Kimiko and Dr. Mahmoud taught Ryuko everything that she'd need to know to take care of Satsuki mentally, physically, and emotionally.

An hour after the meeting with her psychiatrist, Satsuki was surprised to see her doctor walking into the room. He handed her a clipboard full of papers before going over the sheets quickly but thoroughly. Ready to get the hell out of the hospital room that had been her temporary home for the past week, Satsuki sloppily scribbled her name on the last form with her left hand. "You're all set to go home, Miss Kiryuin. Your nurse will be in shortly to help you get changed." As he turned to leave, he paused and then turned to look her straight in the eyes. "Your sister will be helping you

until you get back on your feet, as part of your treatment plan. It is because of her that you are able to leave here so soon. Keep that in mind,” he said calmly, before turning around once more and vacating the room.

Baffled, Satsuki had little time to reflect on this before Kimiko bustled back into the room. She helped Satsuki into some sweatpants and a loose-fitting t-shirt that Ryuko had brought from the manor. Ryuko entered the room, smiling as she pushed a blue wheelchair in front of her. “Ready, nee-san?”

Satsuki nodded and allowed Kimiko and Ryuko to guide her to the wheelchair. As Ryuko pushed her sister down the hallway and towards the elevator, Kimiko waved and called out, “Bye, girls! I hope to see you again under different circumstances! Take care of yourselves!” Ryuko flashed a toothy grin as she pushed her sister into the elevator and then popped out once more to wave to Kimiko before disappearing from the hospital ward.

Chapter 8

The ride back to the manor was bringing Satsuki both relief and apprehension. As happy as she was to leave the hospital, her home did not feel like much of a home to her. Still, she held onto hope that the familiarity of her surroundings could bring her some comfort, along with the sister stealing concerned glances at her every few seconds. As the taxi pulled up in front of the huge front doors of the manor, which Satsuki noted seemed to have been repaired already, Ryuko hopped out of the car and sprinted around to Satsuki's side of the car and wrenched her door open, eager to assist. Satsuki rolled her eyes and attempted to exit the vehicle on her own, swaying momentarily as she stood. Ryuko grabbed her arm to steady her, her blue eyes striking Satsuki's core with the amount of care they held. Satsuki gasped inaudibly before pulling her arm from Ryuko's grasp.

"I can walk on my own, you know," she asserted, though the walk up the stairs to the door had already winded her. She pretended to lean nonchalantly against the door frame, catching her breath as Ryuko paid the cab driver. Fishing in her pockets clumsily for the key to the door, Ryuko cursed under her breath. "I know I put it somewh--got it!" she exclaimed as the metal jingled around in her hand. Ryuko let Satsuki enter first, closing the door behind her.

"Hey, if you wanna chill for a while, I can make you some tea and lunch if you want," Ryuko suggested, keeping in mind the dietary restrictions the nurse had set so that Satsuki's stomach would not become overwhelmed at the reintroduction of complex foods. Exhausted, Satsuki merely nodded before walking to the living room that was adjacent to the kitchen. She plopped herself down on the couch and reveled in the comfort it brought her fatigued body. Her eyelids began to droop until the sound of the kettle piercing the air grabbed her attention, and she found herself craving the tea that she practically survived on for the past 13 years. Ryuko entered the living room, walking cautiously while blowing gently on the hot drink that she was carrying before handing it to Satsuki, who sipped it despite the urge to gulp it down. The tea soothed her throat, which was still sore from the tube.

Ryuko disappeared and Satsuki relaxed into the couch cushions once more, reveling in the taste of her tea, her liquid comfort. As she downed the last of the cup's contents, Ryuko returned with two steaming bowls of ramen in her hands, setting one in Satsuki's lap before sitting in an armchair across from Satsuki and hungrily digging into her food. After a few minutes of nonstop food consumption, Ryuko looked up at Satsuki and noticed that her bowl of food remained untouched. She was about to ask why when she noticed the pained look Satsuki had and the way she was awkwardly attempting to hold the chopsticks in her left hand. Her tongue stuck out as she concentrated on getting the perfect grip on her chopsticks, but she was unable to keep them steady.

"Fuck, this is going to be a long couple of months, eh Satsuki?" Ryuko joked, slurping up the last of her food before joining Satsuki on the couch. "If you need help, just say so. That's what I'm here for," she beamed proudly. Sighing, Satsuki reluctantly handed her chopsticks over to Ryuko, refusing to look her in the eyes. Ryuko expertly gathered some noodles between the chopsticks before bringing it to Satsuki's mouth. "Open up for the train! Choo choo!"

Satsuki's face turned a shade of red that Ryuko didn't think was possible for someone so pale. "Fuck you," Satsuki growled embarrassedly, but the growling of her stomach overpowered any other verbal abuse she may have chosen to spew at Ryuko, and she opened her mouth reluctantly to allow her younger sister to feed her. After the meal, as Ryuko washed the dishes in the kitchen, Satsuki leaned her head back on the couch cushions. *This is so fucking embarrassing, I'm like a baby that can't do anything for herself. Although it is cute to see Ryuko acting like the big sister. Wait, what?* She backtracked, flushing at the thought. Before she could reflect on this any longer,

Ryuko came back to the living room.

“You okay, Sats? You keep turning really red. Do you have a fever?” she inquired, reaching out to touch Satsuki’s forehead with the back of her hand. Satsuki flinched before pushing her hand away and murmuring “I’m fine.”

“Whatever you say,” grumbled Ryuko. “Anyways, what do you wanna do now?”

Satsuki’s hand, absentmindedly stroking her own short locks of hair, realized then how greasy her unwashed hair was and grimaced. “A shower would be really nice, actually,” she admitted, “but I don’t really think it’s possible with this shit on my hand,” she exclaimed, waving her bandaged hand in front of her.

“Nah, Kimiko said it was fine as long as it doesn’t get wet. We just have to wrap it in a plastic bag or some shit to keep it dry,” Ryuko explained, hopping up and sauntering into the kitchen once more. She returned with a plastic bag and a roll of tape. “See, we just have to put this bag over your hand,” she articulated as she demonstrated, “and then tape it down around your arm, like so.”

“I look like a joke,” replied Satsuki as she looked at her ridiculously wrapped hand. “And besides, I can’t take a shower with one hand anyway,” she sulked, before realizing the implications of what she’d just said and jerked her head up to watch Ryuko’s reaction. Ryuko appeared deep in thought, but turned to Satsuki and asked, “Well, would you rather take a bath or a shower? I could start a bath--”

“NO.” replied Satsuki, too quickly and too loudly. Baths were something that Ragyo had tainted for her, so much so that showers had become the only way that Satsuki cleaned herself. Ryuko had noticed Satsuki’s sudden stiffness at the mention of the word ‘bath.’ Shrugging but taking note to avoid offering baths in the future, Ryuko grabbed her sister’s functional hand, pulled her into a standing position, and stated, “Shower it is, then.” She let Satsuki guide her through the labyrinth that was the manor to the bathroom (“I don’t want to get us lost in here; god knows how long it took me to find you a week ago, for fuck’s sake”) but made Satsuki sit on the toilet seat cover while she searched through her sister’s room for a clean change of clothes for both herself and Satsuki. Satsuki was surprised to see Ryuko return with two sets of clothing in her arms but less than surprised to see her sloppily toss them into a pile on the floor. When the water was turned on and set to a comfortable temperature, Ryuko turned to Satsuki and explained, “Since you can’t do much with that bum hand of yours, I’m just gonna have to get in there with you to, like, well, you know,” she blushed, “but it doesn’t have to be weird or anything. I’m just doing you a favor.” She swallowed as Satsuki considered her for a moment.

“Well, it’s not like I have much of a choice,” she said resignedly before standing and attempting to remove her shirt awkwardly. “Besides, it’s not like it’s the first time we’ve seen each other naked,” she finished casually, covering her pink cheeks with her half-inside-out shirt and pretending to be unable to remove the shirt from her head until she was sure that the color was gone from her cheeks. Ryuko laughed at her sister’s struggle before removing the shirt for her, followed by her bra and sweatpants. Satsuki shivered ever so slightly as Ryuko’s fingers brushed against the skin at Satsuki’s waist as she pulled her panties down for her. “Alright, in you go,” Ryuko said in a voice much higher than normal as she gently pushed her sister’s naked body into the warm running water. Ryuko stripped off her own clothes quickly before joining her sister in the spacious shower, closing the opaque glass door behind her. Ryuko immediately noticed the wide variety of shampoos, conditioners, and hair treatments that lined the shelves in the shower.

“Holy shit, how much hair care stuff do you need?!” Ryuko blurted out.

“My hair used to be down to my ass, dipshit, and that takes a lot of care to maintain,” Satsuki

retorted, suddenly self conscious. “Use this bottle of shampoo,” she commanded, tossing the wet bottle at Ryuko’s face. Ryuko managed to deflect the bottle but ended up knocking herself in the face as she fumbled with it.

“Bitch,” she muttered under her breath as she squirted the shampoo into her palm and barely restrained herself from tossing it back at Satsuki’s face. Satsuki, who was letting the water wash over her front side, jumped as Ryuko’s hands touched the back of her head and would have slipped if not for Ryuko quickly throwing an arm around her waist and pulling her back up.

“Sorry,” gasped Satsuki as Ryuko gave her a weird look. “Please continue,” she pleaded, and Ryuko began massaging the lather into Satsuki’s short hair once more, biting back a comment on Satsuki’s behavior. As Satsuki rinsed her hair, Ryuko grabbed a random bottle and quickly washed her own hair. Grinning deviously, she began shaking her hair out like a wet dog, spraying Satsuki with sweet-smelling bubbles.

“You’re so childish, Ry--”

“AHHH FUCK I GOT SOME IN MY EYE” Ryuko screeched, desperately but gently pushing her sister out of the water stream and letting the water pelt her own face. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she heard Satsuki snort beside her. *At least she still has a sense of humor*, Ryuko noted. The only time her sister had smiled throughout this whole ordeal was when the tube had been removed, and Ryuko was determined to bring some of the light back to Satsuki’s eyes. Ryuko conditioned Satsuki’s hair, but Satsuki would not allow her to wash her body. Complying, Ryuko handed a soapy washcloth to her sister and conditioned her own hair, all the while keeping an eye on her sister’s naked form to make sure she wouldn’t lose her balance again. *Dat ass though*, Ryuko thought appreciatively as she stared. *Wait, fuck, I can’t be thinking shit like this while she already has a ton of bullshit to deal with. File that under ‘things that are not okay’ and forget about it for now.*

Satsuki only required assistance washing her left arm, which Ryuko happily obliged before washing her own body off and rinsing herself completely. Once both girls were dry and dressed, they made their way back to the living room, where Ryuko played video games on the big screen as Satsuki absentmindedly read a novel on the couch. After dinner and listening to Ryuko talk incessantly about their friends, Satsuki found that she was completely worn out, despite the fact that it was only 8:00PM. Yawning, she stood and stretched out her back and legs before turning to Ryuko and asking her to accompany her to her room.

“I have to show you where your bedroom is so you don’t get lost later,” she stated.

“No guarantees,” responded Ryuko, flashing a grin before following her sister down the long hallway. Upon arriving outside Satsuki’s room, she pointed to the door directly across the wide hall and explained, “That’s your room. It should have clean linen, but if not, there should be some in the closet next to the bed. There’s a bathroom connected to that room, so please do not bother me tonight. And try not to wake me up when you go to bed. I’m very tired,” she panted, out of breath from the walk and the long-winded explanation she’d just given (which was not really that long but she was still adjusting to breathing, and this was the most she’d spoken at once since leaving the hospital). Before Ryuko could interject, Satsuki opened the door to her own room, gave a curt “goodnight,” and closed the door in her sister’s face. “Rude as hell,” grumbled Ryuko as she went back to her video games before finally retiring to bed around midnight.

Chapter 9

Ryuko was awakened suddenly at 3:13 in the morning by an ear piercing scream. Startled, she disentangled herself from the blankets and hopped out of bed to go investigate, but not before tripping over the pile of clothes she'd unceremoniously dropped near her bed mere hours before.

"God damn it, what the hell?" she muttered as she opened her door, panic beginning to set in. Realizing the screams were coming from Satsuki's room, Ryuko bound into action. She attempted to open her sister's bedroom door but found it to be locked. The screams stopped, but Ryuko could hear a loud commotion going on in the room. Thinking quickly, she ran to the bathroom where they'd showered earlier, which was next to Satsuki's room and, more importantly, had doors that both led to the hallway and the bedroom. Relief washed over Ryuko as the doorknob of the bathroom door that led to Satsuki's room turned and she wrenched it open violently.

Ryuko blindly reached for the light switch and flicked it on, blinking back against the sudden brightness. Her eyes adjusted and she was surprised to see that the bedroom was trashed. Drawers from the dressers and night stands were haphazardly hanging open, their contents strewn about on the floor. Half of the mattress of the bed was slumped over the side of the bed frame and the sheets were bundled in a ball in a corner of the room. Satsuki was rummaging around in the walk-in closet, mumbling incoherently under her breath.

"Satsuki, what are you doing?" Ryuko asked hesitantly as she moved to the doorway of the closet. As if she hadn't heard a word that Ryuko had just spoken, Satsuki continued digging through boxes on the floor. After a minute Satsuki mumbled, "Gotta find," switching to the overhead shelves and pushing clothes aside sloppily.

"Find what?" inquired Ryuko, baffled. "You're freaking me out." She took a step closer so that she was within arm's reach of her sister.

"Must...find...at least a little bit. Just a little..." Satsuki trailed off, tossing a stack of sweaters over her shoulder.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Ryuko growled in frustration. She placed a hand on Satsuki's shoulder, intent on making her sister face her and give her some answers. The results were not what she had expected. Satsuki froze, her body stiffening at the touch and becoming catatonic. For an entire minute, Satsuki remained statuesque. Then, in the blink of an eye she took a rapid step back so that her back was against Ryuko's front. Satsuki grabbed Ryuko's outstretched arm and leaned forward quickly, violently flipping her over and knocking the wind out of her. Ryuko's eyes widened as she finally got a look at Satsuki's face. Her eyes were distant, as if she was not seeing the closet but another dimension.

Panicking but unable to move, Ryuko watched as her sister lowered herself on top of Ryuko and raised a fist, aiming for her face. "Shit," Ryuko gasped when she realized Satsuki was about to beat her face in with her bandaged hand. Satsuki's fist sprang forwards, impossibly fast, but Ryuko was faster; she shot both of her arms forwards and grabbed Satsuki's incoming forearm, rolling to her left so that Satsuki's fist missed the ground while using both of their momentum to flip them over, leaving Ryuko panting but pinning her sister down under her. Tears pooled in Satsuki's eyes as Ryuko held her down.

"Please, mother. No more. I promise I will be good. I promise!" she begged as tears ran down the side of her face into her hair. Not knowing what else to do, Ryuko gave the side of Satsuki's face a few gentle slaps, as if trying to wake someone who had passed out.

“Snap out of it, Kiryuin!” pleaded Ryuko fiercely. At the sound of her surname, Satsuki jumped and her eyes came into focus. She took in her surroundings briefly, eyes flitting around the room before landing on Ryuko’s worried ones.

“Get off of me,” she said in a monotone, maintaining a neutral facial expression. Ryuko faltered, afraid of Satsuki going wild again but also not too keen on having the shit beat out of her for disobeying, and she slowly stood and offered a hand to Satsuki. Satsuki did not move, however, remaining sprawled out on the floor of the closet. “Where is it?” she whispered, her voice flat.

“Look Satsuki, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talki--”

“Where is all of my alcohol?”

Ryuko swallowed. “Oh, yeah, uh, about that. Well, while you were in the hospital, the Elite Four and I kind of, you know, got rid of all of it.” When Satsuki did not answer, or even move from her spot on the floor, Ryuko began rambling nervously. “See, like, we figured that since you obviously have a problem with it since there were bottles all over your room when I came to find you, and I mean there really is no situation in which that shit is good for you, we cleaned out the whole manor of every last bottle. The doctors said you needed to be staying in a place that was alcohol free too, so we made sure this place didn’t have one drop of alcohol in it. We just wanted you to be safe, you know?”

Robotically, Satsuki sat up and looked at Ryuko with deadened eyes. “Please leave,” she commanded, leaving no room for argument.

“Don’t you want help cleaning up your room? It looks like a shit show and there’s no way you can sleep with the bed like that.”

“I don’t care,” she responded lifelessly, pulling her legs to her chest and resting her chin on her knees. “I don’t care. I don’t care about anything. Just get out.”

Perturbed, but not discouraged, Ryuko left the closet but began tidying up the room. Once the bed was back in place and made, she began closing drawers (but did not bother folding the clothes that had been disturbed; she merely squished them down until they would fit in their respective compartments). Satisfied that the room was no longer a tripping hazard, Ryuko went back to the closet and saw that Satsuki had fallen asleep, still curled into herself in the middle of the floor.

This shit is wild. The psychiatrist is gonna have a hay day when she hears about this. Carefully, Ryuko wrapped an arm around her sister’s shoulders and another arm under her knees, hefted her up, and carried her back to the bed. After tucking her sister in, she made her way back to her own room, registering the fact that the clock by her bedside now read 4:04AM. Letting herself fall face down onto the bed and not bothering to cover herself with her blankets, she fell asleep almost instantly.

Chapter 10

Satsuki woke up at 8 on the dot that morning. Sunlight filtered in between the curtains, and Satsuki watched the dust particles float by for a few minutes. She realized she was floating just as aimlessly in her own life, but couldn't muster up the energy to care about this. Sighing, she walked to the kitchen and began preparing some tea, taking more time than normal due to her useless right hand.

I can't wait until this stupid hand is healed so I can go back to doing this stuff normally. Another voice in her head questioned her intentions. You want your hand to be normal so you can do what? Walk around the manor all day doing nothing like before it got hurt? Admit it, your hand healing isn't going to change anything.

"Shut the fuck up," Satsuki mumbled, rubbing her temple with her left hand. She pulled the kettle off the stove, effectively silencing its shrill whistle, and poured the water into her tea cup, only spilling a few drops. Closing her eyes as she savored the taste of her favorite beverage, Satsuki let her mind drift to what she remembered from last night. She'd awoken in the closet with Ryuko sitting on top of her and pinning her down, and she doubted Ryuko would ignore the incident. If only she hadn't asked about the alcohol, maybe Ryuko wouldn't have found out how weak she really was. As she swallowed the dregs of her tea, Satsuki decided to see just how thorough her sister and student council associates had been.

Starting with the cellar, Satsuki was unhappy but impressed to find that they had somehow emptied it in its entirety. *There had to have been over 1000 bottles of liquor in here*, she reflected, searching every nook and cranny for a stray bottle but coming up empty handed. *Perhaps in mother's room? No...I can't go in there. I guess I'll have to check every other room.* She spent the rest of the morning becoming increasingly frustrated as she thoroughly checked every room in the manor but found nothing. Even the attic and basement were devoid of her vice. *I'll have to buy some then. It's too bad all the manor employees are gone, I could send one of them out for me, but I guess it can't be helped.*

Checking the clock and noting it was half past 11, Satsuki returned to her room, changed into a clean but wrinkled outfit (*Why the hell do all my clothes look like Ryuko did the laundry?*), and walked to the nearest liquor store. It was a beautiful morning, she noted, but she had one thing on her mind and nothing was going to slow her down. A bell above the door of the liquor store chimed at she pushed the door open and began perusing the selection. She was so focused on the colorful bottles in front of her that she did not notice the store owner doing a double take as he laid eyes on her. He stared for a few seconds at her, then down at something behind the counter, before pulling out his phone and dialing a number. The phone rang a few times in his ear until a groggy "Hello?" silenced the ringing.

"Code red, I repeat code red."

"Fucking hell, it's not even noon," the voice cursed, but he could hear movement on the other line. *"I'll be there in 5. Stall if I don't get there in time."*

"Got it." He hung up the phone and looked up to find that Satsuki had disappeared down one of the aisles. He sighed, drumming his fingers on the countertop nervously. How was he supposed to stall one of the richest people in the country? Unfortunately, Satsuki seemed to have made a decision, and she carried a few bottles of vodka and rum up to the counter.

"Good morning, miss, how are you today?"

“I’m well, how are you?”

“Just living the dream, ya know?”

Satsuki hummed and waited for the man to start ringing her up, but he just stared at the bottles instead.

“Is there a problem?” asked Satsuki, her voice icy.

“Ahh, no problem, I just need your ID.”

Satsuki reached into her back pocket and pulled out the required card. She handed it to the man, who began to thoroughly examine it.

“I can assure you it’s not fake, I am of age,” she huffed.

“Sorry ma’am, I forgot my glasses today, could you show me where exactly the date is on this card?”

Irritated, Satsuki swiped the card from his grasp and pointed to the very obvious, large print date in the top right corner.

“R-Right! How could I have missed that,” he chuckled nervously. A bead of sweat rolled down the back of his neck as he picked up the first bottle. “Wait! Do you hear that? It sounds like the phone in the back is ringing! I’ll be right back,” he promised, swiftly disappearing through the doorway. Satsuki listened to the man have a loud (and, unbeknownst to her, fake) conversation about when a shipment was due and what exactly needed to be on the shipment. Impatiently, she contemplated just taking the bottles and leaving cash on the counter, until the sound of the door being slammed open interrupted her train of thought.

She glanced at the door then back to her potential purchase. Suddenly her eyes went wide and she did a double take to find Ryuko standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest and hair flying every which way. Satsuki flinched at the sight of her sister’s intense glare before looking guiltily at the bottles next to her on the counter.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing here?” Ryuko growled, leaving no room for excuses.

Panicking, Satsuki started, “I can explain, I--”

“Go ahead and try to explain this rationally. I’m very interested in hearing it.”

It was no use. Satsuki’s mouth hung open uselessly. She’d been caught red-handed and she knew it. Ryuko marched forward, grabbed her arm, and began pulling her from the store, but not before placing a folded up piece of paper on the counter (a thank you note for the man who’d called). Like a child that knows it’s in big trouble, Satsuki hung her head and dejectedly allowed Ryuko to guide her out of the store and back towards the manor. They walked for a few minutes, Satsuki being dragged gently by Ryuko, until suddenly the younger girl whirled around to face the older. Satsuki was jolted with guilt when she saw tears in Ryuko’s eyes.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” she shouted, her volume increasing with each sentence. “God damn it, Sats, do you not remember what happened in the last week? Is this just a game to you? You almost fucking died and it’s like it didn’t even faze you. Do you hear me? You almost died! Do you want to go back to the hospital hooked up to all that shit? Is that the kind of life you want to live? Huh? Because that’s the path you’re walking down right now!” she screamed. Satsuki said nothing, choosing instead to stare at her feet and allow her sister to berate her.

Clouded by the self-centeredness that came along with her depression, Satsuki softly mumbled, “It’s not like I have anything to live for anymore, so who cares?”

Ryuko froze. Subconsciously, she recognized this statement as one of the red flags that the psychiatrist as warned her about, but she felt too offended by Satsuki’s response to think clearly. “What the fuck? What the fuck. What the actual fuck. Am I nothing to you? Nothing to live for, my ass. How about to have a relationship with the sister you just found out you have? Or to go to college or pick up a new hobby or hang out with your stupid friends who ask me about you every damn day? Are they nothing to you, too? Life is about growing up and leaving the past behind you, not wallowing in it and destroying your body in the meantime. The only way to get over it is to talk about it and rely on the people that love you, dumbass. I’m right fucking here so let me help,” she pleaded, eyes softening.

“I...I don’t know how to open up or let my guard down or move on,” admitted Satsuki, voice wavering. Ryuko grabbed her hand and began walking with her back towards the manor.

“When we get home, I’m going to make some food and then we are going to actually talk about all that shit you keep hidden inside, got it?” She felt her sister’s hand become clammy in her own and detected the ever so slight shiver that ran through Satsuki’s body. Ryuko’s thumb began rubbing soothing circles on the back of Satsuki’s hand in an attempt to alleviate her anxiety. “It’ll be alright, nee-san. You’ll feel a lot better afterwards, I promise.”

Satsuki was silent the rest of the way to the manor and throughout lunch as Ryuko fed her. Once the dishes had been washed, Ryuko plopped down into the armchair across from Satsuki. Anxiety about telling Ryuko about her traumatic past was gripping Satsuki like a vice, making it hard to breathe. She bounced her knee up and down and chewed a fingernail on her left hand, avoiding eye contact with Ryuko all the while. Ryuko watched these behaviors and decided to comfort her sister in the only way she knew how. She moved to the couch and sat next to Satsuki before taking her hand in her own and rubbing the same soothing circles on Satsuki’s trembling hands.

“I’m ready when you are,” Ryuko stated encouragingly. Satsuki opened her quivering jaw and began to speak.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is full of things that may be triggering to some people, so proceed with caution. Physical and sexual abuse is mentioned.

Robotically, Satsuki began recounting the events of her childhood. “It all started after dad died...or left, I guess. I had to act a certain way, be perfect at all times, or I would be severely punished. One time I spilled tea on the rug and she held me under the shower on the hottest setting until my whole body was red and burning. I was only six.” Her eyes had a faraway look to them, as though she were watching the events unfold in her mind.

“Grades had to be consistently high. Anything less than an A- would result in a beating so intense that I would limp for days on end. I think I must have had every rib broken in those instances combined. After that my grades were always perfect.” She paused, running the uncovered fingertips of her injured hand over her ribs absentmindedly.

“She loved to humiliate me in front of the manor workers. They became colder towards me as Ragyo’s influence changed how they saw me. The only one who saw me for who I truly was was Soroi. He has been my rock through all of this.” She took in a deep, shaky breath before continuing in that same detached voice. “On my eighth birthday, everything changed. She brought me into her bedroom and said she had a surprise for me. I was stupid to think it could be anything good,” she muttered, her grip on Ryuko’s hand tightening. “She made me...undress. She took a bunch of pictures of me naked, maybe for blackmail or something worse, I’m not sure. Then she forced me to walk naked through the manor to the bath house and started what she called a ‘purification ritual.’ She...touched me...and I let her.” A sob broke from Satsuki’s throat as her face burned with shame.

“I didn’t...couldn’t stop her. She groped me all over until she was satisfied, then made me walk back to her room, still naked. This was a weekly occurrence while I lived in that hellhole.” Ryuko gently moved her hand to Satsuki’s back and, ignoring the scars that littered the landscape of her porcelain skin, rubbed it comfortingly despite Satsuki’s initial stiff reaction to the touch. “When I turned 12, it got even worse. Besides the ‘ritual’ in the bath, she would call me to her room every once in a while and ‘show me a mother’s love,’” she spat out bitterly. “Her touch became rougher and she...she started...she f-fingered m-me until I climaxed.” A shudder ran through Satsuki’s body as she relived the event.

“I didn’t understand why she was doing this to me when I had done everything she’d ever asked. I suppose she just enjoyed manipulating me in every way possible. This abuse went on until I finally moved to Honnouji Academy, under the guise of working for her. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but the opposite was true in this case. The time away from her was the best time of my life because I was free from the abuse for the first time. Of course, any time I was called back to the manor, like after our fight, she still insisted on performing the ‘ritual’ on me. I endured it because it meant survival, but now it’s like she’s haunting me with the memories I can’t get rid of.”

Ryuko wiped the tears from her sister’s face with her thumbs, with such tenderness that it shocked

Satsuki. Her story was far from over, but she was finding that letting the words pour out of her was having a cathartic effect, making the recounting easier. “When I was hanging in the cage for that month, things became worse than ever. I was rarely fed and I was only given enough water to keep me alive but not adequately hydrated. My body was so weak that I could barely move, but I forced myself to do pull ups and leg exercises to keep in shape. Every day that she came to see me, she brought a different device to torture me. Sometimes it was a whip, sometimes it was a taser. Sometimes she’d have extremely cold water poured over my naked body until I was chilled to the bone. She never dried me off, just left me there as I shivered painfully. I think I passed out from the hypothermia a couple of times. She’d just watch me with that smirk as she drank hot tea, as if taunting me with what I couldn’t have. Other times she used me as a punching bag until I could barely breathe from the pain. Or she’d bring a lighter and burn me while I was blindfolded so I’d have no idea where she’d burn next. And every day she would grope me all over with her stupid, evil hands. She raped me every day that I was trapped down there and I could do nothing, just like before.”

Tears poured from Satsuki’s eyes, allowed to flow for the second time in her life, the first being at the hospital a few days before. “A few times she drugged me with something. I don’t know what it was, but it made the verbal abuse so, so real. I started to believe I really was useless, worthless, not needed or wanted, a failure. After the effects of the drug wore off, I couldn’t tell my thoughts from during the incident apart from those before, so I started to become brainwashed into believing what she said about me.” She shook her head, still confused about what was real and what were lies fed to her by Ragyo.

She resumed her account, whispering, “One d-day, she even w-waterboarded m-me.” Her body began shaking uncontrollably as the memory washed over her, making it as hard to breathe as it had been when the waterlogged cloth had covered her face. “I thought I was going to die,” she gasped, her breathing quickening dangerously. “I...wanted...to...die,” she divulged, the statement punctuated by her loud wheezes as she hyperventilated. She swayed where she sat as her vision began to tunnel and her body became numb from the increased oxygen she was rapidly taking in. She could hear Ryuko speaking, but it sounded distant and hard to understand. Satsuki felt detached from her body as the panic attack continued. She barely noticed the gentle pressure at the back of her head, holding it in place while her mouth was surrounded by a rough object.

Ryuko, having been told how to react to a panic attack by Satsuki’s psychiatrist, had taken to carrying a paper bag around in her back pocket at all times, just in case. *I guess it came in handy*, she mused as Satsuki was forced to breathe into it. As Dr. Mahmoud had explained, the bag limited the amount of air that Satsuki could inhale while simultaneously allowing for increased carbon dioxide exchange and decreased oxygen inhalation, therefore correcting the imbalance caused by hyperventilation. As her breathing slowed and she regained her peripheral vision, the numbness blanketing her body dissipated and the trembling slowed, leaving her feeling incredibly fatigued. Satsuki realized that at some point she had leaned sideways (or fallen? She wasn’t quite sure) onto Ryuko, who was awkwardly attempting to hold her up while holding the bag up to her face. Her head was resting on Ryuko’s chest, tucked under her chin, and she could hear her sister’s steady heartbeat pounding in her ear, a calming lullaby bringing her peace in her distress. She stayed there for a few conscious minutes, allowing her body and mind time to recover from the stress of reliving her worst nightmares.

“You alright?” Ryuko’s voice rumbled through her chest and into Satsuki’s ear. Experimentally, Satsuki sat up, causing stars to dance in front of her eyes. She waited for the lightheadedness to abate before uttering a raspy “Yeah.”

“Good,” Ryuko breathed before pulling her sister into a hug. Satsuki stiffened but quickly relaxed into the hug, even managing to wrap one of her own arms around Ryuko in an appreciative but

awkward gesture. “Thanks,” she murmured, hoping it would convey the depth of her gratitude to her sister. Ryuko gave her a squeeze before pulling away and looking at her sister’s red, tear-stained cheeks. Suddenly embarrassed, Satsuki rubbed her eyes while muttering a hasty “Sorry” under her breath.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ryuko responded reassuringly. “Want some tea?”

“I’d like that,” Satsuki replied, leaning back comfortably on the couch and closing her eyes.

In the kitchen, Ryuko set the kettle on the stove and leaned against the counter as she waited for the shriek signaling that it had come to a boil. She stared broodingly at the floor as her body shook with fury. She could not form coherent thoughts, instead allowing the myriad of emotions to swirl violently through her head, a tumultuous storm brewing in her mind. Her grip on the counter became stronger, cracking its surface as her rage threatened to boil over, until the kettle’s whistle grabbed her attention. She put on a calm façade as she brought the now prepared cup of tea to her sister, only to find that she’d fallen asleep, head resting on her own shoulder in the most uncomfortable position Ryuko could have imagined. For a fleeting moment she allowed herself to pity Satsuki but pushed the emotion out as quickly as it had come. She knew Satsuki would never want to be seen as a victim, so she would not let herself see her as one. Setting the teacup on the coffee table, Ryuko once again found herself carrying her sister back to her bed and tucking her in, stopping to brush the hair out of her still blotchy face and admiring the look of peace gracing her features for once. After scrawling out a quick note and placing it, along with the teacup, on Satsuki’s night stand, Ryuko yanked on her jacket and jammed her hands in the pockets as she stalked out of the manor, rage growing once again.

Chapter 12

Ryuko wasn't sure where she was or where she had gone, but was sure that she had to keep moving. Her knuckles were split open, bleeding down her fingers and leaving a trail of sorrows and pain behind her. She wasn't even sure how she'd gotten the wounds. All she knew was that the white hot rage had consumed her, eating away at her consciousness until she'd become nothing more than pure anger, a force to be reckoned with. She clenched her fists, the shredded skin protesting as it was pulled at the seams, but she didn't care. It would heal quickly, she knew, a gift of her life fiber infused body. Waves of emotion crashed at her endlessly; guilt, fury, nausea, anger, horror, hatred, sadness, pity, helplessness, rage again, cycling over and over until the pain in her jaw could not contain it and she let forth a roaring cry of despair. Angry tears began to fall, making a silent path down her face and joining the blood spots that she was leaving behind her. The emotions within her began to writhe and bubble over until she found herself jogging, then sprinting, as fast as she could until her feet brought her to a small forest on the outskirts of the city. Aiming for a clearing she knew was ahead, Ryuko dodged her way through the trees, expertly avoiding them despite her speed. She reached the clearing and doubled over, clutching her knees as she took in heaving breaths, panting from her exertion.

Straightening up suddenly, she lunged forward, planting her fist into the first tree she could. Bark scattered everywhere as the tree absorbed the hit, but ultimately the trunk was pulverized under the force of her strike, sending the remnants blasting forward. The next half hour was a blur as Ryuko demolished tree after tree, sending branches and blood everywhere. When she finally sat on a newly created log next to the bubbling stream, she allowed herself to cry. She cried for Satsuki, whose childhood was robbed from her in more ways than one and whose present was still haunted by these events. She cried for the guilt she felt, both at not being there for Satsuki growing up and for treating her like shit before they knew of their relation. She cried for her loss of Senketsu, whose advice she suddenly craved. She cried at the loss of her father, allowing the sobs to replace the violence she usually used to cope with his death. Ryuko bawled until she had no more tears to shed. Then, she emptied her mind as she dipped her hands into the cool water of the stream to wash some of the blood away. The wounds had not closed, but she figured it was probably due to the extensive amount of forestry that was now embedded in her hands. Standing up, she shook the water off of her hands before leaving the clearing, which was now considerably larger than before she'd wreaked her havoc. Her feet began leading her towards Mako's house, and she allowed them to bring her to the new Mankanshoku residence so that Mr. Mankanshoku could take care of her hands.

Satsuki, somewhere between sleep and waking, was jolted awake suddenly, the whole-body twitch immediately dispelling any lingering drowsiness. Surprisingly, it had not been the result of a nightmare. As she lay in bed contemplating this, she realized that this was one of the few times that she had slept an entire period without being plagued with visions of the traumas she'd weathered, save for the times she'd been under the influence of alcohol or hospital-strength narcotics. Satsuki found that she felt lighter somehow, as if the burden she'd been struggling with for so long was no longer crushing her under its weight. Perhaps the burden itself was lighter, or was it the fact that she was no longer the only one carrying it? Satsuki wasn't sure. She took a deep breath, savoring the feeling.

Glancing at the bedside clock, she found that it was half past four. *So I've been sleeping for almost three hours? I suppose I needed it after how little sleep I got last night.* She sat up and realized she had a pounding headache from crying earlier. *Where's Ryuko when I need her?* As her eyes passed

over the nightstand again, Satsuki realized there was a piece of paper tucked under the tea that had cooled long ago. Nimble fingers extracted the note and unfolded it carefully until she was greeted by Ryuko's untidy scrawl.

Hey,

figured I'd get some fresh air while you're sleeping. I'll be back soon.

If you need anything, call one of your nerd friends.

Left my phone here.

-Ryuko.

Why wouldn't she bring her phone with her? What if she gets into trouble? She's too reckless, worried Satsuki, but knowing that there wasn't much she could do about this situation, she let it go. *What I need right now is some aspirin for this headache.* Satsuki stood slowly to prevent dizziness before walking to her bathroom and flicking on the light. She dug around in her medicine cabinet, cursing internally as her hand knocked a few bottles from their respective shelves, sending them tumbling to the ground. Finally locating the bottle of aspirin, she set it aside and quickly picked up the medications that had fallen. Satisfied once they were back in place, she turned to the bottle of aspirin and realized she had absolutely no way of opening a childproof cap with one good hand.

Fucking shit. Now what? She examined the cap, finding it to be the kind that requires one to push down on the top while simultaneously rotating the cap. Experimentally, she placed her bandaged hand over the cap and applied pressure, but the pain that shot up her arm was enough to dissuade her from ever attempting that again. Next, she pushed down with her left hand and rotated her wrist but, without a hand to hold the bottle to prevent it from spinning along with the cap, the effort proved to be futile.

This is a nightmare. I can't do anything by myself. I hope Ryuko doesn't feel like I'm a burden. Maybe that's why she left?

A voice that sounded like a combination of her own and her mother's piped up the back of her head, claiming, *Don't you remember? You are a burden. I'm surprised it took Ryuko this long to leave. She's probably sick of having to take care of you like a baby. Look at baby Satsuki, she can't even feed herself! She's only taking care of you because she feels bad for you since you're such a useless failure. You're worthless and nobody wants you here.*

Her rational side attempted to dissuade this new voice. *T-That's not true. If it was then she wouldn't have come looking for me in the first place! She--*

The voice cut her off, swiftly retaliating, *If she cared so much, why did it take her a month to finally drop by, hmm? She's probably after your money and just using you, just like you let Ragyo use you.*

NO! You're wrong! If I had gone against Ragyo, then I'd surely be dead right now. Ryuko's not like that. She has to care, right? she mentally asked herself, resolve wavering.

If that's the case, then where is she now? And why wouldn't she bring her phone? She abandoned you here, knowing you can't do anything yourself. Face it, you're alone again, just like you were in that underground cage.

Satsuki screamed, tears threatening to escape from her eyes. She threw the bottle forcefully at the mirror in front of her, causing a dent to form a spider web of cracks from the impact point,

distorting her view of herself. The bottle cracked open, sending pills flying everywhere. The voice faded away, whispering out a final *You're nothing* before it receded. Satsuki stared at her reflection through the cracks, doubt creeping into her mind as her body trembled.

Just ignore it. Don't indulge in that type of thinking. You're fine. Ryuko will be home soon and everything will be fine. She sighed and looked at the pills littering the floor. *I guess I'm not totally useless, since I was able to open the bottle,* she thought darkly. Grabbing a cup next to the sink, she filled it with water and gulped down a couple of pills that had landed on the counter, hoping they'd kick in soon. *Now for the rest of these...what can I put these in?* Kneeling on the bathroom floor, Satsuki began digging through the cupboard under the sink, searching for an empty container or bag into which she could deposit the pills. Pushing aside some bottles of bleach and glass cleaner, something caught her eye. An opaque plastic bottle was staring back at her, beckoning her with the two bolded words that were printed at the top of the label: "Rubbing Alcohol."

Chapter 13

Time seemed to stop as Satsuki froze, gasping slightly as she stared at the bottle. *So they didn't actually find everything*, she thought. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, arm still outstretched, before she blinked suddenly as if snapping out of a trance. Her long fingers wrapped around the bottle and pulled it towards her, examining it carefully. "70% Alcohol," it proclaimed proudly. Satsuki stood quickly, hugging the bottle to her chest. *I'll keep it just in case*, she thought deliriously, the excitement of her acquisition clouding out rational thought. She darted around her room, deliberating on the best place to keep it, before deciding on stashing it between her headboard and mattress, held in place by a spare pillowcase she'd snatched from the closet. Her worries about Ryuko had vanished completely with her discovery, and she found herself humming as she made her way to the kitchen for a Tupperware container for the pills. After cleaning the bathroom (and double checking that the bottle of alcohol was still in place), Satsuki made her way to the living room, where she immersed herself in a novel until she heard the front door open and close. She shut the book and looked up, expecting to see Ryuko walking into the room, but was surprised to find that it was Nonon.

"Nonon, what are you doing here?"

"The shithead texted me from the underachiever's phone telling me to come over. She says she won't be here until late, if at all tonight, so I'm supposed to stay the night if she doesn't come back," Nonon explained, crinkling her nose in mock disgust at the mention of Ryuko. "Anyways, I figured this would be a good opportunity for us to catch up, Satsuki-sama."

The two girls chatted for a while, Nonon droning on about her musical endeavors and her preparations to eventually take over the Jakuzure Corporation. Satsuki, despite her happiness at her friend's successes in life, couldn't help but think that her own life was pretty boring in comparison. Sure enough, the dreaded question finally popped out of Nonon's mouth: "So, what have you been up to?"

Satsuki could tell that Nonon had been dancing around the issue of Satsuki's whereabouts for the past month throughout their conversation, but she'd mustered up the courage to finally throw it out there. Not sure how much she was willing to divulge, Satsuki shrugged uncomfortably.

"I've been here, mostly. You know, doing business, trying to salvage the Kiryuin name. Boring stuff like that." She waved her hand dismissively but was surprised when Nonon cut her off, concern evident in her eyes.

"I've been talking to Matoi, so I know that's not true. I was here with the others, cleaning up your room after the accident." Satsuki paled, having forgotten this particular tidbit of information. Nonon watched her carefully before sighing and continuing. "I know things have been bad for you, but you're not alone, you hear me? If you need anything, just let me know, Satsuki-sama. We've all been worried about you."

Satsuki was touched by her friend's devotion (and relieved that she wasn't being forced to describe the past month). "Perhaps tomorrow the four of you could come visit, all together again," Satsuki suggested, hoping that if her friends saw that she was doing well (or if she could at least fake it for them), they would not be so worried about her.

"That's a great idea. I'll text the monkey, the toad, and the dog right now and let them know," Nonon smiled, pulling out her phone and texting the others quickly before pocketing it. Satsuki's stomach grumbled suddenly, causing Nonon to laugh and Satsuki to cover her stomach in

embarrassment. “Wanna get takeout delivered?” Satsuki nodded, and not even 30 minutes later their food arrived and was spread out across the coffee table, waiting to be eaten. Nonon snapped apart both her own and Satsuki’s chopsticks, then handed Satsuki a pair.

Sheepishly, Satsuki looked across the table at Nonon, who was eating voraciously. Her cheeks flushed pink before she stuttered out, “R-Ryuko usually h-helps me...” She trailed off, face turning redder than before as she hoped Nonon would understand what she meant by this. Nonon looked at Satsuki’s untouched food and the chopsticks set down beside it before swallowing forcefully.

“Holy shit. No way,” she breathed.

Suddenly self conscious, Satsuki withdrew into herself, crossing her arms over her stomach while gripping her elbows. Nonon jumped up and nearly sprinted to Satsuki’s side, a pink flush covering her own cheeks as she picked up Satsuki’s unused chopsticks. Between bites of her own food, Nonon fed Satsuki eagerly. Satsuki couldn’t help but feel that it felt more natural when Ryuko was feeding her and not staring at her reverently the whole time. After the meal was completely devoured, Satsuki turned to Nonon and offered her a small, appreciative smile as thanks. Nonon nearly squealed in delight before chatting for a few minutes until she realized Satsuki seemed distracted.

“Is something wrong, Satsuki-sama?”

Satsuki jumped at the sound of her name before hesitantly asking, “Is Ryuko coming back? It’s getting late.”

“Well I’d text her but she said her phone was here. I’ll text the underachiever and see what’s up.” The pink phone was once more withdrawn from her pocket. A few seconds after setting it back down, a piece of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* began playing. Nonon swiped the phone back up and checked the response before informing Satsuki that Ryuko had left Mako’s house about an hour ago. Satsuki bit her lower lip, worried. It was dark outside now, and who knew what kind of trouble her sister may have gotten into.

“Don’t worry, she already told me that I may have to stay, and it’s no trouble at all. Why don’t we watch a movie?”

Satsuki agreed halfheartedly as Nonon popped a DVD into the player, but paid it no attention to the movie, instead glancing at the clock every few minutes. As the end credits began rolling, the manor doors slammed open, startling both of the girls on the couch. Nonon let out a high-pitched “EEP!” as a sopping wet figure appeared in the doorway of the living room. Apparently it was raining, and Ryuko had been caught in it. She eyed the two girls on the couch before glaring at Nonon, pointing at her and demanding, “Oi! Troll! Come with me.” Satsuki made a move to get up and follow, but Ryuko growled out, “Stay there until I come back for you.” Confused (and a little hurt), Satsuki sat back down and watched as Ryuko and Nonon left, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Chapter 14

Bewildered, Nonon followed Ryuko down the hall to her bedroom. The fact that Ryuko appeared to be somewhat unsteady on her feet as she stomped loudly was not lost on Nonon, who was suddenly suspicious. In the safety of her bedroom, which she'd locked behind her once Nonon was inside, Ryuko sat on the edge of her bed and rested her dripping head in her hands. Nonon was about to speak until Ryuko looked up at her with the most haunted look she'd ever seen on the transfer student's face.

"She told me everything," Ryuko mumbled, turning to stare blankly at the wall in front of her.

Taken aback, Nonon stammered, "How-How bad?"

"Worse than I ever could have imagined," she whispered. She let out a dark chuckle before slurring out, "I can seeee why she started drinkin."

"You imbecile! Are you drunk? What the fuck are you thinking?"

"I had to do it juss once to see what it's like for 'er. I ain't gonna make a habit of it. Juss this once." She fell backwards onto the bed, arms outstretched. "The worst part is -hic- it didn't even help. Not even a lil." Tears sprung into Ryuko's eyes as she tried to control her breathing to stop herself from crying. Nonon sat down next to her on the bed, laying a hand sympathetically on Ryuko's knee before muttering, "You're an idiot."

Ryuko barked out a laugh. "Yeah, I know. But at least I get to shower with Satsuki," she grinned deviously, hoping to provoke Nonon. Sure enough, Nonon's head spun to face Ryuko so fast that she was surprised it didn't fall off. Nonon's face was the same color as her hair, and Ryuko couldn't help the laughter that bubbled out of her at the sight.

"Say something like that again and I'll make sure you're the one that needs someone to feed them," grumbled Nonon as she pinched Ryuko's leg as hard as she could.

"Ow! What the fuck, troll?!" she screeched, rubbing the painful spot.

"I'm going home. It's getting late. Don't forget you left your sister in the living room, you dipshit."

Ryuko bolted up and looked at Nonon, asking, "How sober do you think I can act? I gotta help 'er get ready for bed. No, wait! YOU can help her tonight! I know you really waaannnna do it. You gotta help her change and alllll that shit. You'll love it--" A swift punch in the stomach silenced Ryuko instantly.

"Shut the fuck up, you bag of dicks. But yeah, I'll help her tonight. I'll tell her you weren't feeling good or some shit like that."

Ryuko managed to wheeze out a "Thanks, bitch" as Nonon turned to leave, slamming the door behind her. In her drunken state, Ryuko kicked off her shoes and tossed her sopping wet clothes in a pile before drying off and changing into her bunny pajamas. She flicked off the light, falling asleep as soon as she hit the bed.

Nonon returned to the living room to find Satsuki biting her fingernails on the couch. She stood quickly as Nonon entered the room, blurting out, "Is Ryuko okay?" Nonon rolled her eyes and

waved her hand dismissively.

“The dumbass doesn’t feel good. Says she doesn’t want you to see her throwing up and shit. She’s fine though. She told me to help you with whatever you need though, since she can’t.”

Satsuki sighed but allowed her childhood friend to assist her with brushing her teeth and changing into her sleepwear. Nonon wasn’t sure if she was supposed to stay the night since Ryuko was back, but she wasn’t sure how useful she’d be if she was still inebriated. Deciding it was best that she stay, Nonon wished Satsuki goodnight before locating one of the numerous guest rooms and making herself comfortable.

It seemed the night would go off without a hitch until approximately 3:00AM when Satsuki woke up sobbing. She stumbled out of bed and made her way out of the room, padding across the hall to Ryuko’s room before knocking ever so gently on the door. The tears continued to fall, though she wasn’t sure why. She sniffled and was about to knock again when the door opened slowly. Ryuko stood in the doorway, squinting through the darkness until she made out the figure of her sister in the blackness. Satsuki sniffled again, causing Ryuko’s hand to shoot out in an attempt to find her sister’s. It took a few tries, no doubt because of the lack of sobriety and illumination. When her hand finally connected with Satsuki’s she pulled her into the room, kicking the door shut behind her, and enveloped Satsuki in a quick hug before guiding her silently to her bed.

Satsuki wasn’t quite sure what she’d expected when she’d come over here; she simply felt that she needed to see Ryuko but hadn’t planned out much more than that, so she was surprised when Ryuko picked her up and tossed her gently onto the queen sized bed. Impaired by the alcohol and grogginess still running through her system, Ryuko crawled onto her own side of the bed, covered the both of them with the blankets, and turned onto her side to face Satsuki. Sensing that the bed was shaking ever so slightly, Ryuko reached out and placed her hand on the back of Satsuki’s head, pulling her closer until their foreheads touched, their breath mingling with their proximity. Her hand lingered for a few seconds before sliding down Satsuki’s back until it reached the lower curve of her spine. Sleepily, Ryuko pulled her sister against her body so she could wrap her arm around her. After a few seconds, her light snores filled the air.

Satsuki was frozen. This was a lot more than she had bargained for, but the warmth her sister was radiating and the sound of her rhythmic breathing soon put Satsuki at ease. Her eyelids began to droop so she let herself drift to sleep, feeling safer than she ever had before.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning sunlight filtered into the room, rudely awakening Satsuki by shining in her face. She groaned, rubbing her eyes as she rolled towards the center of the bed in an attempt to avoid the beams of light. A quiet gasp escaped her lips as she found herself face-to-face with Ryuko's sleeping form. *I must have slept here all night*, she mused, surprised that she'd made it through the rest of the night without waking once. Ryuko was lying at the edge of the bed, an arm and a leg dangling off precariously. A puddle of drool had gathered under Ryuko's cheek, forming a wet spot so large that Satsuki was mere inches from lying in it herself. Grossed out, she rolled the opposite way off the bed, stretching for a few seconds until she heard a satisfying *crack* emitted from her back. Silently, she padded to the kitchen and was surprised to find an assortment of muffins and danishes on the counter, accompanied by a note.

Satsuki-chan,

I had to leave early for band practice. I figured I'd leave some breakfast food for you so you don't have to wait for Matoi to wake before eating. The four of us will be over for dinner around 5, so don't let

the dumbass cook anything, as we plan on cooking for you. Take care until then.

♪ *Nonon.*

Grateful for a food she could eat with one hand, Satsuki picked up a blueberry muffin and munched on it, savoring the taste and the independence the meal brought her. Not even a minute later, Ryuko came skidding into the room, wrestling her shirt on as she nearly crashed into the doorway.

"We're gonna be late!" she shouted, swiping a muffin off the counter and shoving it in its entirety into her mouth.

"You just ate the wrapper!" Satsuki yelled back confusedly.

"Gft fretthehd ahn lesgeh!" Ryuko sent bits of muffin flying everywhere as she attempted to get Satsuki up and moving. She dragged Satsuki to her bedroom, dressed her carelessly in sweatpants and a loose t-shirt that clashed horribly, then practically carried her towards the door of the manor, chewing all the while.

"What's going on? Where are we going?" Satsuki inquired as she looked at her outfit. "I don't even match. I look ridiculous."

"Gotta get to the hospital so the-ACK!" Ryuko hacked as the muffin wrapper finally made itself known. She flailed uselessly for a few seconds, then turned to the trashcan and spit out the perfectly intact, though soaked in saliva, wrapper. Ryuko pushed Satsuki out the door to an awaiting cab, only relaxing once they were both buckled in and the car was moving.

"Ryuko, what's this about?" demanded Satsuki.

"I forgot you have an appointment at 11 this morning to get your hand looked at," she shrugged,

leaning her head against the window. “Must have slipped my mind,” she explained as her voice wavered from the vibrations of the car running through the window to her head. The car pulled up less than ten minutes later in front of the huge hospital. Warily, Satsuki stepped out of the car, anxiety building as she was pulled closer and closer to the doors by an insistent Ryuko.

Satsuki dug her heels into the ground, resisting her sister’s pull until they were at an awkward tug-of-war type of standstill with Satsuki’s good arm acting as the rope. Ryuko noticed Satsuki had paled considerably since exiting their ride.

“Are you nervous?” she asked gently as she stepped closer to Satsuki, still gripping her hand tightly (for fear that she’d try to make a break for it). The silence was all the answer Ryuko needed. She cupped Satsuki’s face in her hands and brought her down to her level so they could see eye-to-eye. “It’ll be okay. I’m here for you. They’re just gonna see if they can take the bandages off so you can start using your hand again eventually. Check how much function you have, stuff like that, you know?”

“But no psychiatrist, right?”

“Nah, not unless you want to. They can’t force you to do anything you don’t want to.” Satsuki relaxed slightly and allowed Ryuko to guide her to the front desk so they could check in for her appointment. As they settled into the chairs scattered around the waiting room, Ryuko turned to Satsuki with a guilty look in her eye.

“Just so you know, they said I’m not allowed to be in there for this appointment, but they won’t ask you anything unless it has to do with your hand, so there’s no need to be nervous. I’ll meet you out here when the appointment is over. If I’m not here I’ll probably be getting a snack from the vending machine or some shit like that,” she smiled, rubbing her stomach.

Satsuki nodded once, though she did not understand why Ryuko couldn’t come with her. She did not have much time to reflect, however, because her name was being called from the front desk, beckoning her. Ryuko gave her a reassuring pat on the back as she stood and moved towards the voice. She looked back at Ryuko once when she reached the person calling her and received a grin and a thumbs-up of encouragement.

As soon as Satsuki had disappeared down the hallway with the doctor who’d been summoning her, Ryuko glanced at the receptionist. The receptionist paused, ears perked up, before giving Ryuko a quick nod. Instantly, Ryuko popped up and sprinted her way through the hospital halls, reaching the elevators in record time. She jammed the “UP” button, grumbling under her breath as she waited for the doors to open. A “ding” signaled the elevator’s arrival and Ryuko wasted no time hopping in and selecting the fifth floor. She held in the button to close the doors the entirety of the ride so that no one else could get on and make her later than she already was. When the elevator reached her destination, she barreled out of the vehicle and turned left, nearly crashing into a wheelchair and some oxygen tanks in her haste.

Down the hall to the left, third door on the right, she reminded herself mentally. Finally reaching the door in question she paused, took a deep breath, and then knocked. The door opened immediately and Ryuko was ushered in by Dr. Mahmoud.

“Sorry I’m late, I overslept and almost made Satsuki late, too,” she huffed out.

“It’s no trouble. Do you have anything to report?” the psychiatrist asked, motioning for Ryuko to sit on the black couch that occupied almost a quarter of the space in the room. The office was small but cozy. The couch lined one of the side walls; the doctor’s desk lined the other side. The back wall was made up entirely of windows and an armchair was placed in front of them

diagonally so as to face the couch slightly. It was a sunny day, and the light filling the room from behind the armchair made it seem like the psychiatrist, now seated in the chair, was radiating sunlight. Ryuko nearly laughed as she remembered the days of staring at her sister through a similar luminance.

Kicking her shoes off, Ryuko sprawled out on her back over the couch; an arm and a leg hung off, resting on the soft carpet below. Her neck rested on the armrest and her right arm was bent above her head so she could use her own palm as a pillow. Sighing, she closed her eyes and pursed her lips, allowing herself to gather her thoughts. After a minute of silence, Ryuko began recounting the events of the past few days, letting the words flow out as quickly as she could. She explained the strange trance Satsuki had gone into the first night after screaming her head off, tearing the room apart, searching for alcohol. How Satsuki attempted to buy alcohol the next morning. That Satsuki had finally told her about her past, leaving out no details. The panic attack and the paper bag that followed. How Satsuki reacted to being touched, no matter who was doing the touching or the type of physical contact that was being shared. The fact that Satsuki had come to her room sobbing less than twelve hours ago and had stayed the whole night. She described changes she'd noticed in Satsuki's personality: how she was more withdrawn, quiet, speaking much less than before the fall of their mother; that she no longer initiated anything, instead allowing Ryuko to plan out and control her entire life.

"Her friends keep texting me asking for updates because she still doesn't answer her stupid phone. The Satsuki I knew would never let anyone control this much of her life. She just seems so...lost," Ryuko finished, unclenching the fist that she realized had tightened painfully around the material of the couch. The psychiatrist had been diligently taking notes in her notebook, trying to keep up with everything Ryuko was relaying to her. As she jotted down a final note, she looked up from the notebook, giving Ryuko a sympathetic look.

"It seems that things have been worse for Satsuki than you thought," she commented.

Ryuko nodded, averting her gaze to the ceiling. "It's like, I knew it had to be some pretty heavy shit for her to be this worked up over it, but who knew it would be so awful?"

"How have you been dealing with all of this?" the doctor asked, watching Ryuko carefully.

An embarrassed look crossed Ryuko's face as she blushed, remembering her activities from the previous night. "Heh, well," she started, rubbing her now healed knuckles absentmindedly, "Yesterday I beat the shit out of a bunch of trees and then I, uh, well I went to a bar and got trashed." A worried look crossed Dr. Mahmoud's face and she opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by Ryuko. "It was a one-time thing. I don't wanna end up like her. I just wanted to see how she felt to give me some perspective. I know it was dumb but whatever." She crossed her arms over her chest as the therapist nodded, acknowledging Ryuko's reasoning.

"Based on your report, there are a few things that I have concerns about regarding Satsuki. The first, of course, is her propensity to turn to alcohol instead of using normal coping mechanisms. It is not uncommon for people who have an inclination to use alcohol to cope to find any substance that is comparable in the face of a lack of access of their normal drink. For instance, cough syrup is known to cause inebriation if enough is ingested. Household chemicals such as rubbing alcohol are also used in times of desperation, which is very dangerous and potentially fatal. It is important that you make sure that anything that can cause drunkenness is removed from the house." She paused, tapping her pen against her jaw thoughtfully.

"Secondly, what you mentioned about her being drugged is especially troubling. It sounds as though the distorted memories that were made while under the influence of the drug are interfering

with her self esteem and her ability to see herself as a valuable person. It would be helpful if you could figure out what she thinks of herself and try to set her straight. This may be confusing for her, so try phrases that don't dismiss her experiences. For instance, something like 'I understand that you think you are worthless, but I don't see you that way.' It is important to acknowledge her feelings without denying that the memories she has may very well have happened, because telling her that what she knows is a lie can be disconcerting. I believe a good start would be to ask her about what her mother said about her while she was held captive. It's impossible to tell at this point how the drugs may have affected her memories but based on what you've told me today I'd say the drug was used mostly to destroy any sense of self worth that she may have had, as opposed to creating false memories."

Contemplatively, she looked back at her notes. "As for those pesky panic attacks, it's best to teach her some breathing methods in case she's alone and doesn't have a paper bag around her. If she can prevent the panic attack from occurring, this will be a step in the right direction. Teaching is done best when a panic attack isn't happening, since it is difficult to focus once the panic attack is in full force. It may take a while to determine what works and doesn't work for her. Distraction is a great technique. If you can sense she's starting to panic, ask her simple questions to take her mind off the panic, such as 'What's your favorite color?' or 'What's your favorite food?' Something that won't require her to think too hard, as this can cause panic to escalate. Once she's been distracted, you can instruct her to use the breathing methods that you've taught."

Setting the notebook down, the doctor sat on the edge of her chair and straightened her back to demonstrate. "Ideally, the goal is to prevent hyperventilation, those short, quick breaths. To do this, have her place her hand on her stomach so she can feel her abdomen moving when she breathes." The therapist demonstrated, moving one hand to her abdomen. "You want her to feel with her hand that she is breathing correctly, like this," she explained, before exhaling with pursed lips. "Breathing out as if blowing out a candle, but slower, counteracts the effects of hyperventilation by allowing carbon dioxide to be expelled while limiting how much oxygen she takes in. Tell her to focus on exhalation more than inhalation and imagine something calming, such as the sound of waves with each breath. Anything that you can find that can prevent a full blown panic attack is encouraged. If they become too much to handle, we may consider putting her on an anti-anxiety medication, but that means having her see a doctor, which is an issue in itself."

Dr. Mahmoud sat back more comfortably in her chair before peering at Ryuko. "She will undoubtedly have good and bad days, so it's a matter of dealing with her issues on a day by day basis. Do you have any questions?"

Shaking her head, Ryuko sat up and began pulling her shoes on. "Oh, wait! Is there any way I could get your cell number in case of an emergency?"

Dr. Mahmoud ripped a sheet of paper from her notebook and quickly scrawled down her number. "I'm not really supposed to give out my information to clients, but technically you're not my client. Please use this for emergencies only. Any information that you need to share with me can be relayed while your sister is in physical therapy. We can meet those days, if you'd like."

"Yeah, thanks," Ryuko grinned, sliding the number into her back pocket. "I better get back before Satsuki gets suspicious. I'll see you next time?"

The psychiatrist nodded and shook Ryuko's hand before walking her to the door. "Good luck!" she called as Ryuko hopped into the elevator.

Sorry this update is later than usual, my cousin got married yesterday and we had to stay in a hotel overnight and I didn't bring my laptop. I just want to comment on a few things presented in this chapter. Concerning panic attacks, I had many during high school (the best four years of your life, right? ha) because school and swim team took up my life and I lived 30 minutes from school, making a hell of a commute. Anyway I had a lot of my panic attacks at the pool and my coach was always there to talk me through them. It's weird, and I don't know if this works for everyone, but I'd be hyperventilating and she'd be like "What's your favorite class?" and I'd almost instantly go back to normal breathing because my focus shifted to something else instead of the panic. All the stuff about breathing, though, I learned in nursing school. Also I know it's not realistic for a doctor to see a patient through a proxy like this but hey that's why fiction exists lol. If there's something you'd like to see or if you have suggestions or experience with these types of mental issues, I'd love to hear your feedback. I only know how my own depression feels/felt, so input would be appreciated. Anyways, thanks for reading! I'll probably go back to my every other night update schedule now that the wedding's over.

Chapter 16

Ryuko made it back to the waiting room just as Satsuki was released from the doorway by the receptionist desk. Ryuko noted that her right hand, hanging limply by her side, was no longer bandaged. The back of her hand was marred by a vertical, angry red line, located between her middle and ring finger bones, stretching from just below her base knuckles to midway down her hand, about an inch in length. Ryuko could only imagine what her palm looked like, considering the amount of damage she'd seen upon discovering Satsuki. She joined Satsuki at the desk as she checked out, then looped her arm through her sister's to guide her to the car that was waiting to bring them back to the manor. Once they were situated in the back of the car, Ryuko turned eagerly to Satsuki, curious as to how her appointment had gone.

"So, any news? How'd it go?"

Disinterested as ever, Satsuki replied, "They did some x-rays to make sure everything was still where it should be. The stitches were removed, too. They said to take it easy for now, told me how to look for signs of infection in the wounds, stuff like that." Sensing something in Satsuki's tone, Ryuko looked at her face, which was glued to the headrest in front of her.

"Did something happen?"

Satsuki tensed and found herself wishing Ryuko wasn't so perceptive when it came to her emotions. She adopted the most stoic look she could before monotonously vocalizing, "They said I was lucky that the glass had gone in the way it did, otherwise I'd have severed tendons and nerves and needed months of physical therapy. The doctor says I probably only need a month of therapy if I'm compliant with the home exercises and go to all the PT appointments."

Confused, Ryuko uttered, "That's great, though! What's so bad about that?"

Satsuki was silent for a few moments, closing her eyes as she swayed with the motion of the car. Finally, she muttered under her breath, "Lucky. They said I was lucky."

"Well yeah, it sounds like it could have been a lot worse, I don't--shit," Ryuko faltered, suddenly realizing what Satsuki meant. Satsuki's life seemed to be filled with events that unlucky didn't even begin to describe. Her injured hand had begun to close in on itself, close to forming a fist until Ryuko wormed her hand between her sister's fingers in an attempt to prevent her from causing any more damage to the tender skin.

"Lucky," Satsuki repeated, letting the word roll off of her tongue as if she did not understand the meaning of it. Contrary to her usual outbursts, Ryuko could tell this was different. For starters, she wasn't crying, nor was she breathing rapidly. The only visible reaction that Ryuko could glean was the clenching of her sister's fists. Satsuki felt numb on the inside. The oppressive weight of her past seemed to have pushed out her normal emotions, leaving her completely drained and unable to feel anything besides an unrelenting emptiness.

Deciding to try out something the psychiatrist had suggested, Ryuko took a moment to formulate the wording of her next statement. "Hey, nee-san, I know you may feel like your life has been anything but lucky, but I want you to know that I am happy you're still here and still fighting. Life wouldn't be the same without you."

Glancing towards Ryuko, Satsuki noticed her sister's expression seemed genuine and found herself thinking that at least *somebody* was happy she was still alive. She gave Ryuko a tiny smile before

leaning back against the seat of the car, closing her eyes for the duration of the ride. Ryuko took this as an opportunity to examine the hand that was currently wrapped around her own. She gently unfolded her sister's hand and angled the palm upwards.

A low whistle escaped her before she could stop it, but she was too amazed at the damage, or rather how well it had been fixed, to care. The scar on her palm where the largest piece of glass had entered mirrored the one on the back of her hand except it was a bit longer. In addition, a horizontal wound crossed over the vertical one. Ryuko assumed this had something to do with the repair efforts, judging by the straightness of the line. The rest of her palm was littered with smaller cuts, only a few of which had required stitches judging by the line of red dots that ran parallel to the bigger wounds.

Looks kinda like those graphs from math class with the x and y axes and the dots in the quadrants. Heh, I guess I do remember some shit from school. Maybe while she's asleep I'll do connect the dots on her hand to see if it makes a cool animal or a secret message or something. Wait, what the fuck? Do you want to give her an infection or an excuse to punch you? Oh damn, speaking of infection, I wonder if they gave any instructions on how to take care of this for the time being? I'll ask Satsuki when we get back, she decided, nodding absentmindedly to herself.

However, upon arriving to the manor, it became apparent to Ryuko that Satsuki was not in the mood to talk about anything, choosing instead to lay on the couch and stare at the ceiling. Ryuko sat in the kitchen, chowing down on a chocolate chip muffin and reading the note that Nonon had left Satsuki. *I'll have to get back at her for calling me a dumbass. Or maybe I owe her for last night? Fuck, in that case I probably have to let this one go for now.* She shrugged as she tossed the note in the trash.

A glance through the doorway revealed that Satsuki would probably not be moving from her spot any time soon, so Ryuko decided to act on what Dr. Mahmoud had recommended: removing alcohol-containing substances from the home. She pulled out her cell phone and conducted a quick google search of substances that can cause inebriation. She took a screen shot of the bulleted list and began checking rooms in the manor for any culprits. An hour of rummaging around the house had produced four bottles of expired cough syrup, two bottles of nail polish remover, three bottles of hand sanitizer and a bottle of mouthwash (*Just in case. I don't know how desperate she'll get*), and one half-empty bottle of rubbing alcohol, all gathered from the various bathrooms scattered about the manor. Satisfied, she brought them to the laundry room and poured them all down the extra large sink, running the water as she did so. For good measure, she rinsed each container out before disposing of it.

Ryuko caught a whiff of herself as she replaced the lid of the garbage can and nearly gagged. *Holy shit. I guess I was sweating my ass off yesterday in the forest and didn't even notice. Also I smell like I'm literally sweating out alcohol. The nerds will be over later so I should freshen up and see if Satsuki wants to get cleaned up, too.* She ambled back to the living room, footsteps echoing in the empty hallway along the way. Judging by her appearance, Satsuki had not moved even an inch in the time Ryuko had been alcohol-proofing the household. Ryuko stood in the doorway for a minute, leaning against the door jamb and gazing at her stock-still sister.

“Oi, your friends will be here in a few hours. I'm gonna shower real quick if ya wanna join before they get here.” Satsuki didn't react in the slightest. Stepping forward, Ryuko tried again. “Sats, did you hear me?” she asked, voice laced with worry. Standing in front of her sister, she leaned forward so they were face-to-face. Some relief flooded through her when she could see that at least Satsuki was still breathing; however, this was short lived as she looked into the older girl's eyes. Something was definitely off. The light seemed to be gone from Satsuki's eyes, conveying nothing but hopelessness, emptiness, apathy. Startled, Ryuko cupped her sister's face with her hands.

“Satsuki? Hey, Satsuki, what’s wrong?” She gave her sister’s cheek a few gentle slaps in an attempt to rouse her. “Satsuki! Hey! Come back to me!” Ryuko cried out, her own panic building. *What the fuck is wrong with her? Should I call 911? She’d probably hate me if I did. But they could probably help her better than I can. What did I do last time in the closet that snapped her outta this shit? I already tried slapping her. Sitting on her didn’t work last time. She woke up after...fuck, after what? Ah! When I called her Kiryuin!*

Desperately, Ryuko shouted “KIRYUIN” at the top of her lungs, the force of the yell reverberating around them. Satsuki’s eyes came into focus, looking straight into Ryuko’s cerulean irises. Shaking with relief, Ryuko collapsed onto her sister, enveloping her in a tight embrace. Satsuki tensed at the contact, relaxing only as Ryuko pulled away. “Are you alright?”

Satsuki sat up, nodding once in acknowledgment of Ryuko’s question. Despite the fact that she was now alert, Ryuko noticed that the emptiness had not disappeared from her sister’s eyes. Hesitant to ask about what might have been bothering her, Ryuko asked once more, “I’m gonna take a shower and I wondered if you wanted a shower too? I don’t know if your hand can get wet since I wasn’t at the appointment though.”

Satsuki shrugged but stood and followed Ryuko to Satsuki’s bathroom. Wordlessly, she allowed Ryuko to strip her and usher her into the shower. Steam rose around them, curling upwards in billowing clouds. Ryuko used the same hair products as before, gently massaging them into her sister’s short hair and rinsing them out with the removable shower head. Squirting out a generous amount of a fragrant liquid body wash onto a washcloth, Ryuko offered the rag to her sister, same as last time. However, Satsuki made no move to take the cloth, opting instead to stare blankly at Ryuko.

“Do you...want me to wash you?” Ryuko stammered. Her sister had been perfectly capable of washing herself barely two days ago, yet here she was, completely despondent. As her own hair dripped suds down the side of her face, Ryuko held the washcloth out for an entire minute, waiting for Satsuki to make a move. Ryuko sighed, dropping her arm. She rinsed out her own hair so that she didn’t end up with soap in her eyes like last time, then turned to Satsuki.

“Can I touch you?” Ryuko inquired, looking into Satsuki’s eyes.

Caught off guard by the question, Satsuki murmured, “What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if it’s okay for me to touch you so I can clean you up.”

Satsuki blinked, mouth open, before quietly responding, “You’ve never asked before. What’s stopping you from just touching me like you have been the past few days?”

A cold chill ran down Ryuko’s spine at the implication, despite the heat from the shower. “Satsuki, I--”

“Everyone else does whatever they want with my body. It’s like it’s not even *my* body. It never has been mine, it seems.” Her words hung in the air between them, making it hard for both of them to breathe.

“Fuck, like, if something I do is bothering you, I want you to tell me right away. You don’t deserve to feel used or like you don’t have control over yourself or your body. There are clearly boundaries that I have crossed, so let’s talk about what’s okay and what’s not, alright?”

“Boundaries?”

“Yeah, like if you don’t want to be touched at all, I’ll stop any kind of physical contact with you. Shit, or if you’d rather I ask every time, I can do that, too. If you want to set ground rules, like handshakes and hugs are okay, that is cool also. But you have to tell me so I know when I’m fucking up, okay? I want you to feel like you are in control of yourself, not that you’re my puppet and I’m just leading you around.”

“Oh. I, uh...let me think about it, I suppose,” Satsuki replied, eyebrows furrowed in thought. This time, when Ryuko offered the washcloth Satsuki accepted it and washed herself, albeit very slowly. Once the two of them were dried off and dressed, Satsuki requested privacy in her room until her friends arrived, which Ryuko gladly granted her, as she had her video games to catch up on.

“Fucking bitches think they’re the shit, I’ll show you all,” she murmured under her breath as she ran over multiple people in Grand Theft Auto, sending them flying upwards. Just as she managed to hijack a tank, she felt a shift on the couch next to her. She glanced sideways to find Satsuki sitting next to her, legs bent under herself and arms resting on her lap.

“Can we talk?”

“Yeah, of course.” Ryuko paused her game so that she could give her undivided attention to Satsuki, whose hands were fidgeting nervously in her lap.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said about boundaries earlier. I have given consideration to the types of touch I am okay with and others that I’m not too keen on.” Ryuko nodded, crossing her arms over her chest thoughtfully. “I am okay with you touching my hands and I’m giving you permission to do that from now on. However, you cannot touch me from behind or on my sides unless you ask first. I would also prefer that you ask before hugging me. I appreciate the sentiment but sometimes it is overwhelming.” Her face flushed as she attempted to remain dignified in her next demand. “I do not want to be touched on my...in my...” she faltered, gesturing vaguely from her chest down to her thighs.

Ryuko’s hands shot up in front of her in a defensive posture, ears burning crimson as she blurted out, “Alright! No bad touching, got it.”

Satsuki cleared her throat, regaining her composure. “I think face is okay but please refrain from grabbing my chin. I believe that is all for now. If something comes up, I will alert you immediately.”

“Good. From now on, you are in control of yourself and your body, understand?”

Satsuki nodded, surprised to find that lying down these ground rules had made her feel marginally better. A knock on the door prompted Ryuko to jump up and jog lightly to the door, where the elite four were waiting. She welcomed them into the living room, allowing them to greet Satsuki and make small talk for awhile. Nonon glared at Ryuko initially, but when Satsuki looked away, her gaze towards Ryuko softened and she gave her a quick nod, a sign that the events of last night were forgiven. The six of them enjoyed a pleasant evening together reminiscing about the few good moments from the past and dreaming about the future, playing board games, and gorging themselves with food. Hours later, as she wished her friends goodnight, Satsuki felt something in her chest stirring; an emotion breaking itself out of the graveyard inside of her, bathing the remains of her deadened soul with the faintest beam of warmth. It took her a moment to identify it, but as she shut the door behind her she let the word tumble out of her mouth breathlessly, taking her by surprise. *Hope.*

Chapter 17

The next month passed by quickly in a flurry of doctor appointments and get-togethers with the elite four and occasionally Mako. Ryuko had noticed that Satsuki became more depressed the longer she went without seeing her friends, so Ryuko had ensured that at least one member of the elite four would take her out at least four times a week, although many times all four of the elites gathered to accompany their leader-turned-friend.

Satsuki had regained much of her strength in the weeks following the accident. The doctors were impressed with her progress in physical therapy despite a few setbacks in the beginning, and she had regained almost full function of her hand, save for the occasional cramping episode. Thanks to her friends' and sister's care, she'd managed to gain back all of the weight she'd lost during her month of drinking and her week comatose. She was no longer plagued by episodes of breathlessness or exhaustion, at least physically. Her mental and emotional health, however, was a different story.

Despite the fact that Ryuko was still collaborating with Dr. Mahmoud, Ryuko found that she alone was basically useless when it came to dealing with Satsuki's complex emotions. The breathing methods and distraction techniques had come in handy multiple times, and Ryuko had even gone so far as to instruct the student council elites on these interventions should Satsuki fall victim to her panic when Ryuko was not present. However, these interventions did little to actually stop the panic attacks from developing, seeing as they were meant to be used once a panic attack had already started.

The nightmares had yet to be controlled; Ryuko found herself awoken by soft tapping on her door more nights than not in the past month. On nights like those, despite the boundaries regarding touch that they'd agreed upon, Satsuki would crawl under the covers of Ryuko's bed and latch onto her; oftentimes she sobbed into Ryuko's chest, fingers balled into her sister's ever-dampening pajama shirt as Ryuko gently rubbed her sister's back. When her sobs would die down she'd wrap an arm around Ryuko as her breathing evened out, locking her in an embrace that Ryuko found neither of them minded. With her free hand, Ryuko would stroke Satsuki's hair, watching her sleep until her own eyes drooped shut. As a result, both girls were often seen sporting dark bags of sleep deprivation under their eyes.

Ryuko made up for her lost sleep by napping throughout the day while Satsuki was with her friends. She'd also taken to doing some internet research on alcohol abuse, PTSD, panic attacks, and depression, trying to absorb as much information as she could. Unfortunately, Satsuki had a habit of shutting down any time Ryuko tried to ask about her problems, meaning Ryuko didn't have much information to go on. Ryuko decided to try a new approach. The past five nights in a row had ended with Satsuki in Ryuko's room. Figuring that Satsuki was obviously vulnerable at these times, Ryuko hypothesized that perhaps she would be more willing to open up while her guard was lowered, impaired by the haze of sleepiness and emotional turmoil. It seemed as though tonight would be a good time to try as the soft tapping signaling Satsuki's arrival sounded throughout the room.

Ryuko checked the clock, noting it was 3:00AM. "Like clockwork," she muttered under her breath as she stumbled through the darkness to the door. She opened the door and held her hand out, waiting for Satsuki to take it. It had become an unspoken routine for them, a ritual that soothed both of them with its predictability. Satsuki's trembling hand found Ryuko's in the darkness, prompting Ryuko to gently pull her forward into the room.

“Hug?” Ryuko whispered, always conscientious about not overstepping boundaries. In the silence that followed, Ryuko was certain she could hear Satsuki’s teeth chattering despite the fact that her mouth was closed.

“Y-Yes,” Satsuki breathed shakily; with permission granted, Ryuko’s arms encircled the older girl, pulling her forward in a quick embrace. They walked side by side to the bed, releasing hands only to climb onto the mattress. Once covered by the blankets (something that Ryuko absolutely needed to have on to get a good night’s sleep), Ryuko turned onto her side to face her anxious sister. Typically, and tonight was no exception, Ryuko would let Satsuki initiate any physical contact that she found comfort in. Satsuki scooted towards Ryuko before rolling onto her side so they were facing each other, mere inches between them.

Satsuki reached forward and found Ryuko’s hand, grabbing it and guiding it to Satsuki’s back, a silent request to be held. Ryuko complied, pulling her closer until Satsuki’s legs intertwined with her own. Satsuki fit her head beneath Ryuko’s chin and clutched onto the front of Ryuko’s shirt. For a brief moment, a vision of Satsuki with the body of a koala flashed through Ryuko’s mind, but she quickly pushed it out before she could laugh and be forced to explain what was so amusing. *Alright, it’s time to put this plan in action*, Ryuko encouraged herself mentally. *Let’s start with something simple.*

“Nee-san, what’s bothering you?” Startled by her voice, Satsuki jumped slightly; it wasn’t often that Ryuko tried to speak to her after a nightmare. “It’s okay, you can tell me anything. You know I won’t judge you, and it’s better to not keep it all bottled up inside.” Silence stretched between them, so oppressive that Ryuko was beginning to regret asking.

Satsuki’s body had stopped its violent trembling and her breathing had slowed, and Ryuko figured she’d fallen asleep while avoiding the question, until a tiny voice sleepily murmured, “I was in the cage again...when she drugged me. Everything was spinning...I couldn’t even lift my head. She was saying things, terrible things. I couldn’t tell if it was the truth or not.” Satsuki’s eyes had closed, and frankly Ryuko wasn’t sure if she was sleep talking or not.

“She told me she killed you and I believed her.” Through her sister’s thin nightwear, Ryuko could feel goosebumps erupt over Satsuki’s skin, fading after a few seconds as her body relaxed once more. Ryuko knew from her ongoing sessions with Dr. Mahmoud that finding out what Ragyo had made Satsuki believe while she’d been drugged was crucial, and now seemed to be a perfect opportunity to delve into this while Satsuki was still willing to speak.

“All those times she drugged you, what did she say to you?” Another bout of silence gripped the room as Ryuko waited in anticipation for the horrors that she figured she was about to hear. She could tell Satsuki was falling asleep because her words were slurred and her voice quiet.

“She wasss vry mean. Called me failure. Piece o’ shit. Sed my fault dad leff. He abandoned me for reas’n. Trash. Uselessss. Weak. Stupid. Worth...less. Tol’ me no one was comin’ for me cuz nobody loves me or cares ‘bout me or needs me. ‘s okay, ‘s all true. I deserved all that. I need’d to be punished fr bein bad daughter. Errythn my faul...”

Ryuko’s heart felt like it had been torn in two. Red hot anger flooded through her veins, quickening her heartbeat with its intensity. Her red strand of hair gave off a faint glow, bathing them in a soft crimson light. In spite of her better judgment, she grabbed Satsuki’s arm and shook her from her doze. A flash of fear passed through Satsuki’s eyes before she could contain it, startled from being awoken so suddenly.

“Ryuko! Wha--”

“Do you actually believe all of that shit?” Ryuko growled, pushing Satsuki away slightly so that they could see eye-to-eye. “Do you seriously fucking believe what that bitch told you?”

Satsuki’s eyebrows furrowed. *Do I believe all that? I mean I don’t have a reason not to believe it. Dad really did leave me behind even though he took Ryuko. I had to escape from that dungeon because no one came looking for me in that month. I failed at bringing down mother and let Ryuko do all the dirty work when it came to finally taking her down. I’d say I fucked up tremendously, to be honest. And look at me now; I can’t even get through one night of sleep without crying like a baby. I’d say that constitutes weakness.* “Well...yeah, I guess I do believe all that,” Satsuki announced as she relayed her rationalizations to Ryuko as casually as someone would comment on the weather.

Waves of heat were emanating from Ryuko at this point, alarming Satsuki. “You better get this fucking straight,” Ryuko uttered through clenched teeth, “I want you to forget everything that monster has ever said to you. You are the strongest, smartest, most incredible person I know and I won’t let her take that away from you. You helped save the whole damn world, for fuck’s sake! And you did it all *despite* everything you went through before that! *That* is what makes you strong. Right now you’re just fighting a different type of battle, but the Satsuki Kiryuin I know would never back down from a fight! So keep fighting, damn it!” she shouted, her final words echoing about in the massive bedroom.

A wave of emotion overcame Satsuki, the first real feelings she’d had in what seemed like forever, dissipating the usual emotional numbness she experienced. She lifted her hand to caress Ryuko’s cheek, lightly moving her hand down her sister’s face. A small smile broke out over Satsuki’s face, reminding Ryuko of a flower sprouting from ashes, a sign of life in what was normally lifeless. “I’ll try, imouto,” she whispered, pulling Ryuko’s face forward so she could kiss her forehead. Ryuko’s face burned bright red as Satsuki pulled away and settled herself back under Ryuko’s chin, snuggling into her chest comfortably. Flustered, Ryuko grumbled under her breath but pulled Satsuki close anyway, and the two of them fell asleep wrapped around each other, listening to the sound of the other’s breathing.

Chapter 18

It happened one evening as they walked down the street together towards the grocery store; suddenly they were surrounded by a group of five men leering at them ominously. Immediately Ryuko assumed a defensive stance, staring the leader of the group in the eye. The man chuckled, cracking his knuckles as his biceps rippled in anticipation.

“Hey girls, we don’t want no trouble. We just wanna take all your cash,” he announced, earning sniggers from his comrades.

“Here’s an idea. Why don’t you go fuck yourself?!” Ryuko spat out, fists clenching.

“Ahh, looks like we got ourselves a feisty one, eh? I wouldn’t mind taking you home and showing you a good t--” he choked then, eyes bulging as Ryuko’s fist connected with his abdomen. An audible *whoosh* escaped his mouth as his body curled around her fist; he was blasted hundreds of feet backwards, skidding to a stop along the sidewalk into a storefront. Chaos ensued immediately as the remaining men jumped towards the two girls, tackling them to the ground.

A flurry of fists and limbs flailed about, attempting to make contact with anything in reach. Ryuko managed to jerk her knee into one man’s crotch, earning a pained groan in response; he fell to the ground beside her and writhed in pain. Ryuko grinned before rolling quickly, flipping the man that was subduing her onto his back. A swift punch to the throat incapacitated him as his crushed trachea attempted to allow air to pass through ineffectively. For good measure she delivered a kick to his side, shattering multiple ribs; the lack of oxygen combined with the pain caused him to lose consciousness and his arms slumped uselessly to the ground. She picked up his limp body and tossed it onto the man still rolling on the floor in agony. Ryuko whirled around to the scuffle that was happening behind her.

One of the men had a bloody nose and a rapidly swelling black eye. He was holding Satsuki from behind in a double shoulder lock, arms weaved under her armpits and hands locked behind her neck, rendering her arms unable to move. The remaining mugger was sporting a split lip, dripping blood down his chin as he yanked open her dirtied blouse, sending buttons flying everywhere. Satsuki began squirming violently in an attempt to escape but it was futile; the hold put on her was simply too tight. A greedy look flashed over his face and he reached towards Satsuki’s breast; too distracted by the view in front of him, he never saw the fist hurtling towards the side of his head at an inhuman speed. The impact of the blow jerked his neck at an unnatural angle and he fell to the floor, eyes unfocused and blood seeping out of his ear.

Panting, Ryuko turned towards the last man standing. She saw a look of fear and possibly regret flash through his eyes before anger consumed them. He let out a guttural growl and tightened his grip on Satsuki, intending to use her as a shield. Ryuko’s eyes flitted to Satsuki’s momentarily and realized that she was going to have to finish this fight quickly; Satsuki’s pupils were dilated and her breathing was becoming shallower, a result of her fight or flight response and the panic that was no doubt about to overcome her. After a quick assessment of the scene in front of her, Ryuko formulated a plan (or rather, came up with one move that would hopefully end this quickly and, if not, she’d improvise). She lunged forward until she was behind the man, then dropped into a crouch before spinning and sweeping her leg backwards, aimed directly for the man’s feet. With his feet kicked out from beneath him he fell back, bringing Satsuki with him; unable to brace himself with the arms wrapped securely around Satsuki, his head hit the pavement hard, immediately knocking him unconscious. Fortunately, his body had cushioned the blow for Satsuki, leaving her mostly unharmed (excluding the bruised ribs she’d gotten before she’d been

immobilized). She untangled herself from the dead weight of his arms and stood shakily with some assistance from Ryuko.

“Call the fucking police!” Ryuko shouted to the small group of people that had gathered to observe the commotion. Satsuki pulled her blouse together and crossed her arms over her chest, trying to salvage her dignity; meanwhile, Ryuko, who’d managed to tie the criminals together with rope she’d taken from the hardware store across the street, fussed over her own right eye, which was beginning to turn black as blood trickled from a cut under her eyebrow. Her jaw ached, but these were the least of her concerns. One look at Satsuki, who now had one hand over her stomach and was breathing with pursed lips, told Ryuko that Satsuki was attempting to stave off a panic attack. Ryuko’s eyes darted around, surveying their surroundings before spotting a nearby alley that appeared deserted; quickly, she grabbed Satsuki’s clammy hand and dragged her to the alley.

In the semi-darkness of the setting sun, she found a wooden box next to the back door of one of the shops and gently pushed Satsuki backwards so that she could sit on it. Satsuki winced; Ryuko could see the red splotches that marred her sister’s ribs between the unbuttoned shirt, impeding her every breath. Unable to take in a deep breath as a result of the injury, Satsuki’s breathing was becoming shallower and quicker as her body attempted to compensate. Sensing that this was about to go downhill rapidly, Ryuko reached into her back pocket of her now torn skinny jeans and pulled out a fresh paper bag. Deftly, she unfolded the bag and shoved her fist inside to open it up but blanched when she noticed a large rip. She stared blankly for a few seconds, confusion painted across her face. The short pants that punctuated the air caught Ryuko’s attention.

It must have gotten ripped during the fight. I don’t have another bag with me but I can’t leave her alone to find one. What do I do? Ryuko racked her brain, remembering the distraction techniques that Dr. Mahmoud had taught her.

“Hey, Sats, what’s your favorite color?”

Satsuki’s eyebrows furrowed as she hyperventilated, eyes darting side to side nervously. “You know...it’s fucking blue...you always...ask me that,” she stated between gasps.

“Oh yeah, sorry, I forgot. Ok, what’s your favorite dessert?”

For the briefest of seconds, Satsuki’s breathing paused; she exhaled slowly as the answer to the question popped into her mind, before murmuring, “Mint chocolate chip ice cream.”

It’s working. What else can I ask?

“What is your favorite animal?”

“Probably eagles...they’re so majestic and powerful...birds in general are great...they are truly free, carefree creatures who are able to go where they want, when they want. A true inspiration,” she trailed off, deep in thought about birds, breathing returning to near normal.

What a fucking dork. But at least she’s breathing normal now. Ryuko sighed in relief as she wiped at the stream of blood that had made its way down the side of her own face, wincing as her fingers brushed the bruise that had formed on her jaw. A figure appeared at the mouth of the alley, startling both girls until he introduced himself as a police officer. He wrote down their statements before joining the three other cops that waited at the scene of the commotion, all five suspects packed into the two police cruisers that blocked the street.

“Can we go home now?” Satsuki asked, trying to maintain her composure. For some reason, despite the fact that the panic attack had receded, a deep unease had settled in her chest. She knew

she must be radiating waves of anxiety based on the look she received from Ryuko, but she didn't care. She just wanted to get to the safety of her home.

"Yeah, let's go," Ryuko responded, leading the way out of the alley. "Ahh, wait. Here, take this," she offered, shrugging off her jacket and handing it to Satsuki.

She accepted it wordlessly, pulling it on and zipping it up to her neck, reveling in the warmth and security it provided. Not too keen on walking back to the manor in the waning light, they hailed a cab, stopping at a take-out place to replace the dinner they could no longer make without the groceries they'd been attempting to purchase. After eating their fill they retreated to the living room, nursing their wounds with bags of ice.

Satsuki could not stop shaking, although she wasn't sure if it had to do with the ice pressed firmly against her side or the events that had just transpired. Ryuko lay sprawled out on the chair across from her, a bag of frozen peas draped over her right eye and an icepack held against her jaw. She was breathing evenly, and Satsuki realized she must have fallen asleep.

Thank god she was there to protect me, Satsuki reflected, flinching as she adjusted the ice against her ribs.

The voice that lived in the back of her head took this moment to chime in. *Yeah, good thing she was there or you'd have been fucked. Figuratively and literally, probably. What happened to the indomitable Satsuki Kiryuin, eh? You're pretty useless at this point. People used to fear you, now you fear them. You are truly weak, Satsuki.*

Satsuki's eyes fluttered shut, a feeling of defeat gripping her. *Ryuko told me I should not believe the things that you are saying about me.*

Oh yeah? Well why don't you prove me wrong then? Oh right, you can't because you're a failure.

The anxiety that had not receded since leaving the alley flared up, consuming her like flames. *I can't do this anymore,* she thought, trembling. *I just want to sleep. One night with no nightmares, that's all I ask,* she pleaded to no one in particular. She stood and put away both her sister's and her own cold packs back in the freezer. Not wanting to wake Ryuko, she lifted her sister up carefully, carrying her bridal style to the bedroom before retreating to her own room. Her thoughts were buzzing but she lay in bed anyway, hoping the solace of sleep would grant her a reprieve. However, she was too high-strung to relax.

You need to calm down. You're home and you're alive, be fucking grateful, she chided internally.

The voice returned, mockingly stating, *Looks like you need a drink. If only there was something in this room, perhaps hidden between the mattress and headboard, that you could drink to settle down.*

Satsuki started, blinking in surprise. "That's right, I'd forgotten," she murmured, reaching into her hiding place. Her fingers brushed the pillowcase that held her loot, and a feeling of exhilaration shot through her, prompting her to extract the bottle of rubbing alcohol from its resting place. Greedily, Satsuki sat up, rolling the bottle around in her hands. She read the label, noticing the explicit warning against drinking its contents and how to call poison control in case of ingestion.

"It can't be that bad," she mumbled, unscrewing the cap. The strong scent hit her like a train, immersing her in a feeling of euphoria brought on by something she equated with nostalgia. She raised the bottle to her nose and inhaled the scent of the liquid, coughing slightly. Ryuko's voice ran through her head then, shouting words that had been spoken a month ago.

“You almost died!”

The words seemed to echo in her head, all other thought suspended as the statement bounced around inside her skull. The words faded into nothing as she touched the bottle to her lips and swallowed.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Regret was not a word strong enough to describe Satsuki's feelings for what she had just done. The liquid had been much more powerful than she'd anticipated, burning her nose and mouth with such ferocity that tears instantly sprung into her eyes. She gagged, coughing as the isopropyl alcohol spewed from her mouth onto the blankets beneath her. The small amount that she had managed to swallow before coughing it out had made its way to her stomach, leaving a trail of painful burning all the way up to her throat. Her esophagus felt as if she had swallowed multiple swords, tearing it into oblivion as the wretched liquid moved downward. Satsuki imagined that this must be what it felt like to swallow lava. She struggled to take in breaths between coughs. Abandoning the opened bottle on the nightstand, she clawed at her neck as if choking. An explosion of heat seemed to rip through Satsuki's abdomen, forcing her to double over.

I feel like a bomb just went off in my stomach! Holy fuck, what have I done?! Her stomach heaved then, a sucker punch to her already aching abdomen. *Shit!* Standing rapidly, she sprinted to the bathroom, managing to make it to the porcelain bowl just in time for her stomach to release its contents as she fell to her knees. The bout of vomiting was comparable to the beating she'd sustained earlier in the day; her bruised ribs ached with each heave, sending sharp pains through her side. The alcohol seemed to burn more on the way up, but she mused that this likely had something to do with the fact that it was now mixed with stomach acid. A cold sweat covered her body as she trembled, hands flat against the floor on either side of the toilet, supporting her increasingly heavy upper body. The heaving stopped but the burning sensation lingered, igniting another bout of coughing.

I need...water. She stood sluggishly, gripping the counter tightly for support as the room spun around her. Stumbling to the sink, she turned the water on and stuck her face directly under the stream, clumsily attempting to take in the liquid in an attempt to soothe the blaze that filled her upper digestive tract. Briefly, she registered a voice calling out to her from her room, but her only concern was drinking as much water as possible. A shout, followed by the sound of muffled footsteps, managed to make their way to her ears through the sound of her pulse in her ears and the still running water. She was wrenched upwards by a pair of hands gripping her arms tightly, turning her to face the same blue eyes that she possessed.

"What did you do?!" Ryuko screamed, anger and fear written all over her face. Dazed, Satsuki slumped slightly, knees collapsing; her body was unable to compensate for the sudden position change while under the influence of the potent alcohol.

"Hey! No, no, no!" Ryuko cried out. She deftly caught Satsuki, hoisting her into her arms so that she could carry her to the bed. Laying her down carefully (while avoiding the wet spot), Ryuko scrambled to grab a couple of pillows and stuffed them under Satsuki's legs, elevating them above her heart.

"What the fuck? What the FUCK. I do not know how to deal with this," Ryuko muttered, running a hand through her hair as she paced the room. "Mako! Mako will know what to do," she mumbled, pulling her cell phone from her pocket and pressing the speed dial number for Mako. Tapping her foot as the phone rang, Ryuko sighed impatiently. On the third ring, Mako's voice rang out.

Ryuko cut her off urgently, blurting out, "Mako! Listen, I kinda have an emergency here. I think Satsuki drank some rubbing alcohol and she was throwing up and she almost fell over when I made

her stand so I put her in bed with pillows under her legs but I don't know what I'm doing!"

"Okay, first, make sure she is breathing. Count how many times she breathes in the next minute, alright?" Mako's voice commanded. Time seemed to pause as Ryuko carefully kept track of how many breaths her sister took.

Anxiously, Ryuko announced, "She breathed 13 times! Is that bad? It seems bad!"

"Actually, that's in the normal range. How long ago did she drink it?"

"Uh, I'm not sure, maybe like half an hour? I was asleep." On the other end of the call, Ryuko could hear Mako consulting her father, though she couldn't hear exactly what was said.

"How much did she drink?" came Mr. Mankanshoku's voice through the receiver.

"Ahh, shit. Let me check." Examining the bottle on the nightstand, Ryuko answered, "It doesn't look like a lot...maybe like the same amount as could fit in a shot glass, maybe less. I think she might have spit some out because the bed was all wet when I came in earlier."

"Ask Satsuki how much she drank. It is very important to know the exact amount. Eight ounces is considered lethal, but it sounds like she hasn't had anywhere near that. However, it may still have been a significant amount if she is exhibiting symptoms."

"Oi, how much of this shit did you drink?" Ryuko asked, nudging her sister's shoulder.

Satsuki, whose eyes had closed, rasped out quietly, "Only...lil bit. Lessss than...halfa moufulll."

"Jesus, she sounds like shit. She says less than half a mouthful but why is she slurring her words if it was so little?! Plus she puked it up!"

"This type of alcohol is easily absorbed through mucus membranes, such as the inside of her mouth and the lining of her stomach. Kind of like how you can dip a tampon in vodka and then get drunk quickly once it's inserted--"

"Okay, EWW that's fucked up. Is she gonna be okay though?"

"Hmmm," he began, "how about I come over and spend the night to watch over her tonight?"

"Oh my god, yes please! That would be hella helpful. She'd probably strangle me if she woke up in a hospital again." A grunt from Satsuki confirmed that sentiment.

"We will be over in half an hour. Try to get her to drink as much water as she can to dilute the alcohol. Cover her in some blankets because hypothermia can occur. And make sure she's breathing. See you soon." The call ended, spurring Ryuko into action.

She grabbed a quilt and laid it over Satsuki's trembling body before clambering into the bathroom. Finding a cup on the counter, she filled it with water and delivered it to Satsuki's bedside. Next, she took the bottle of rubbing alcohol and marked the exact level of remaining liquid with a pen she'd found in the nightstand, then proceeded to dump the contents down the sink. Satisfied, she returned to Satsuki's bed, picked up the cup of water, and gently lifted Satsuki's head upwards so she could drink without choking. Instinctively, Satsuki swallowed the water as Ryuko poured it into her mouth slowly. Time seemed to stretch on as she waited for the Mankanshoku's to arrive. As she refilled the cup for the third time, a knock on the manor door alerted her to the presence of her second family.

Rushing to the door, she yanked it open, pulling Mr. Mankanshoku and Mako inside and corralling them to Satsuki's room, ignoring their attempts to ask about her own bruised face. Immediately, Ryuko began babbling.

"This is how much she drank, I marked it here and dumped it out because I don't want this happening again. She drank, like, three cups of water while you guys were on your way. She's still breathing but she barely responds and I have to hold her head up to get her to drink." As she rambled, Mako and her father set to work examining Satsuki; after checking her vital signs they started an IV and hung the bag from the bedpost with a wire clothes hanger.

"We need to monitor her blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing rate throughout the night, just in case," Mr. Mankanshoku announced, clapping his hands together determinedly. "Basically she got drunk extra fast because of the strength of the substance and her relatively low body weight, but I don't think she ingested enough to require hospitalization. However, if the situation changes, she may need to be transferred to a hospital for more specialized treatments."

Satsuki whimpered, brow furrowing, but didn't open her eyes. Sighing, Ryuko laid down next to her. "If you hate the hospital so much, you shouldn't have drank that shit in the first place, idiot."

"You should get some sleep, Ryuko-chan! We will take extra special good care of Satsuki-sama, so you don't need to worry about anything!" Mako reassured, smiling brightly.

Hesitantly, Ryuko peered at Satsuki's face, trying to gauge her reaction. She knew she'd gotten her answer when a hand slowly popped out from under the quilt, moving across the bed until it bumped into Ryuko's, her pinky clumsily wrapping itself around Ryuko's own pinky.

"Actually, I think I'll sleep here tonight, ya know, to watch over her and whatnot," she shrugged, rubbing the back of her neck with her free hand. *Besides, with Mr. Mankanshoku's history of being a creepy pervert, it's probably better that I'm here to stop any weird shit that might go down.*

Hastily, she left the room to change into her pajamas, then showed Mako and her father to her own room should one of them wish to sleep while the other monitored Satsuki. Mako decided to take first shift. She pulled an armchair out of the corner of Satsuki's room and positioned it next to the bed. The girls opted to leave the bathroom light on so that the bedroom light could be extinguished to facilitate sleep. In the shadows that crawled across the room, Ryuko laid on her side facing Satsuki, whose face appeared to be slick with sweat. Gingerly, she swept her sister's bangs off of her forehead, fingers pausing briefly to feel for the presence of a fever. If anything, her face felt cool, but whether from the sweat or the alcohol she wasn't sure. Gentle snores emanated from the armchair, and Ryuko rolled her eyes when she realized that Mako had already fallen asleep with her head drooped forward onto her chest.

I guess I'll have to monitor her for now, even if I don't know how to take a blood pressure or whatever, she decided. Absentmindedly, her fingers traveled under the quilt, making their way down until they reached Satsuki's stomach. She splayed her fingers out, resting her palm on Satsuki's abdomen while being careful not to hit the bruise she knew was there. The slow, gentle up-and-down motion of her sister's stomach brought some comfort to Ryuko. *At least she's breathing.* Protectively, she moved closer to Satsuki's body, lifting the quilt to join her sister in its warmth.

Ryuko focused on the throbbing of her eye and jaw to keep her awake, determined to ensure that someone was watching over Satsuki at all times. The night seemed to stretch on. Like clockwork, Mako woke up every hour somehow and checked Satsuki's vital signs before promptly passing out immediately after. As the time neared 3:00 in the morning, Ryuko felt her anxiety increase.

This is usually when she ends up having a nightmare and comes to my room. She seems pretty unconscious though so maybe it won't happen tonight, she hoped.

The creaking of the bedroom door interrupted her thoughts. Mr. Mankanshoku tiptoed in, shaking Mako awake before gently ushering her towards the door. He gave Satsuki a onceover before taking Mako's place in the armchair, falling asleep instantly.

It must run in the family, Ryuko mused.

Satsuki twitched suddenly, face contorting into one of utter fear though her eyes remained closed. Instinctively, Ryuko reached for Satsuki's hand, grasping it tightly and rubbing her knuckles with her thumb. She kept this up for a few minutes, whispering an occasional "You're safe" or "It's alright" as Satsuki trembled. After what seemed like forever, a deep, shuddering sigh emanated from Satsuki, ironing out the wrinkles on her forehead and replacing them with the visage of peacefulness. The trembling tapered off, allowing her muscles to unclench. Waiting with baited breath, Ryuko watched for signs of any imminent changes, but none came.

She sighed in relief, allowing her heavy eyes to flit towards the clock. 3:30...*I hope this means we're in the clear.* Before she could stop herself, she curled up next to Satsuki, resting her forehead against Satsuki's angular shoulder while gently holding her hand in between them. Succumbing to sleep, Ryuko drifted off, dreaming of a night of uninterrupted sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said that I'd be updating every other day but as of right now, work and looking for a job are interfering with writing, along with a crippling lack of motivation to do anything, so sorry for the delay. I'll spit out chapters as fast as I can though, so thanks for sticking with me.

Chapter 20

A thick fog covered her surroundings; she felt it more than saw it due to the darkness that seemed to have swallowed her. She became aware of shackles around her wrists, the floor disappearing from under her feet. Rainbow light reflected suddenly off of the fog, causing Satsuki to jump in surprise. Struggling against her bindings, Satsuki found that any motion she attempted to make was in slow motion, a futile effort towards an impossible escape. As her mother glided towards her, that familiar, sinister smile plastered across her face, Satsuki froze, eyes wide.

Not again, she thought as tears sprung into her eyes. Ragyo chuckled as she stood in front of Satsuki, eyeing her naked form with a look of sadistic lust and perverted admiration. A cold hand ghosting over her bare side elicited a twitch from Satsuki, causing Ragyo to laugh maliciously. Ragyo opened her mouth to speak but was distracted by a single red thread descending from above them.

The thread moved towards Satsuki's hand, caressing it gently as it drifted downward until it floated between their two bodies, hovering patiently for a moment. Without warning, the red fiber curled in on itself, forming a marble-sized ball before shooting out innumerable tendrils of red, enveloping Ragyo as she staggered backwards in shock. A terrified look was the last that Satsuki saw of her mother before she was completely wrapped in a glowing red cocoon. Before her eyes, the cocoon began to shrink, compressing into itself until it was the size of a beach ball, then a softball, then a marble. A pop rang out, echoing in Satsuki's ears as the red ball vanished into itself. Disbelief was painted over her face, but she was in for a bigger surprise as the thread materialized once more in front of her and formed a tiny ball. Red tendrils snaked outwards from the ball, moving towards Satsuki.

No! It's going to take me too! She panicked, squirming away as best she could, but could not evade the fibers that began covering her. An inexplicable feeling of warmth and relief filled her stomach, blossoming outwards as the threads covered her nakedness, forming a glowing red one-piece suit. As glimmering sleeves materialized along her arms, the shackles sprang open, releasing Satsuki.

You're safe now, the fibers seemed to convey, encouraging her to relax. A small, exhausted smile made its way onto her face before she closed her eyes and embraced the darkness.

Hours later, sunlight filtered into the room, blending with the light that still emanated from the bathroom. Squeezing her eyes together tighter, Satsuki groaned as she slowly woke up.

I feel like I got hit by a train.

She cracked her eyes open and peered to her left and was surprised to find Mako's dad asleep in her armchair. Glancing towards the nightstand, she spotted a cup filled with water and suddenly realized that she was parched. She reached out for the cup with her left hand and was surprised to find an IV leading into her arm, hanging from above her.

Why is that there? Pushing her confusion out of her mind, she gripped the cup and scooted up in bed slightly into a semi upright position, careful not to disturb Ryuko. She gulped the water down greedily. Downing the cup in one go had been a mistake; she'd been expecting relief from her thirst, not the sensation of swallowing rusty nails. As she coughed, a flash of the previous night flitted through her head; recollections of a euphoria quickly snuffed out by the molten fire that had filled her body and had yet to recede. Forcing herself to stop coughing (which was aggravating the

pain in her throat and the soreness of her abdomen), she leaned her aching head against the headboard, letting her eyes flutter shut.

What happened last night? she wondered groggily. The haziness in her head interfered with recalling the events of the night, so she contented herself with leaning against the headboard, hoping the pain that seemed to be assaulting her internally and externally would abate.

“Satsuki-sama, are you awake?” asked Mr. Mankanshoku, who’d awoken and noticed her upright position.

She nodded, not bothering to open her eyes.

“I’m guessing you’re in a lot of pain right now,” he commented. “Would you like some painkillers?” he ventured, eyebrows raised.

Another curt nod was the response he received. Immediately he got to work, digging around in his bag of supplies before withdrawing a syringe and a bottle filled with a clear liquid. He drew up the liquid into the syringe then carefully flicked out any air bubbles before attaching the syringe to one of the ports along the IV line. “It’s going in now, so you may feel lightheaded or heavy when it hits, but it’s nothing to worry about.”

Satsuki’s jaw slackened as her body was almost instantly rid of the pains that plagued her. The headache subsided, her abdomen stopped aching, and the even the burning in her esophagus seemed to die down enough for her to feel somewhat comfortable. A sigh escaped her lips as a sensation not unlike floating overtook her.

Mr. Mankanshoku chuckled as he took a new set of vitals from Satsuki, then stuffed some pillows between her and the edge of the bed so she could not roll off in a drug-induced haze and injure herself. Satisfied, he turned to dispose of the needle with which he’d drawn up the medicine, but a raspy voice caused him to halt in his tracks.

“What...happened...to...me?” Satsuki asked slowly, the medication impairing her normal speaking voice.

“Well, last night it seems you tried to drink some very strong alcohol. Ryuko found you throwing up with a bottle of rubbing alcohol open on your nightstand, so she called us, the former back-alley but now kinda legit doctors! It seems you only ingested a little bit though, so we didn’t take you to the hospital. Unfortunately, alcohol of that caliber tends to cause instant internal burning, so it’s probably going to be hard to swallow anything for the next few days.”

Satsuki zoned out, ignoring anything else he may have been rambling on about; besides, she found that his voice sounded as though it were moving further and further away. She scooted down clumsily into a lying position before promptly falling asleep.

A gentle prodding sensation on her non-injured side roused her from a dreamless sleep. She groaned quietly, rubbing her eyes in a childlike manner before turning to face the source of the insistent poking. On the bed next to her sat Ryuko, legs folded under herself and a neutral expression on her already healed face, continuously jabbing her finger into Satsuki’s ribs.

“What?” griped Satsuki, mildly annoyed.

“It’s noon,” Ryuko remarked casually, fingers brushing the red tinged streak of hair away from her face.

“Okay...are you bored or something? Because I was kind of having a really great sleep there,” Satsuki replied hoarsely.

“I gotta ask you something.” She clasped her hands together, brows furrowing as she set her face into one of determination. “Why did you drink that last night?”

Rolling her eyes, Satsuki draped an arm over her eyes, blocking out the light of the room. “I don’t know,” she replied dully, not too interested in having this conversation.

“What I mean is,” Ryuko started again, rewording the question, “did you take it to try to, like, kill yourself?”

“No, of course not. Why would you think that?” Satsuki responded automatically.

“Well, if that’s not the reason then why else would you do something so fucking idiotic?” Ryuko snarled.

Satsuki flinched at her sister’s tone. Contemplatively, she pondered the question. *Why did I drink it? I barely remember anything from last night.* Faint glimpses from the night before began swimming in her mind, puzzle pieces belonging to a picture she couldn’t see, scattered about in her mind. Something stuck out though: the pain she felt in her side. Uncovering her face, she lifted the hem of her shirt up slightly, unveiling the ugly bruise that was painted across her skin. Her fingers ghosted over it, eliciting a shiver of pain. Suddenly, visions of being attacked flooded her mind as the fight from last night ran through her head, moving as if she’d pressed fast-forward. Ryuko watched her actions intently, not intending on letting Satsuki get out of answering her question. Despite not exactly remembering her reasoning for drinking the rubbing alcohol she knew what her intentions had to have been, as it had not been the first time she’d considered drastic measures in exchange for an uninterrupted night of rest.

“I just wanted to sleep,” she croaked dejectedly. “To sleep and not have to think about the shitty things that keep happening to me. To sleep and not wake up in the middle of the night thinking I’m being held hostage underground or getting molested in a bath or having the shit beat out of me. I just wanted a break from the nightmare of my life.” She stared up at the ceiling above her, too emotionally exhausted to be bothered to see Ryuko’s reaction.

Meanwhile, Ryuko was wrestling with a myriad of thoughts. *I want to be supportive but I also want to tell her she’s stupid as hell and punch her. But that’s probably a bit overboard. Should I tell her she needs therapy? I could bribe her by saying they could give her sleeping meds for this shit. But she would probably be fucking mad as hell if she found out I was going to therapy behind her back in her place. Unless she’s actually happy that I have been going for her because then she wouldn’t have to tell Dr. Mahmoud all the details because I already did that? Okay wait, she will definitely be pissed that I told a random person all of her private problems.* She paled slightly at that thought. *Thank god for my life fiber abilities; at least if she finds out I can probably survive the beat down she’d lay on me. Maybe now would be a good time to tell her while she can’t really fight back. Heh, it’s not like it’s the first time I’ve fought dirty against her.*

Noticing then that the silence had stretched on far too long, Satsuki locked eyes with Ryuko’s, curious as to the lack of the emotional outburst she’d expected. Ryuko chuckled nervously, looking away as a bead of sweat dripped down her neck. Squinting in suspicion, Satsuki gazed at her sister unwaveringly, waiting for *anything*, really. Ryuko cleared her throat before looking back at Satsuki, a guilty look on her face.

“Look, the past month has been hard on both of us, especially you. We haven’t slept a full night in who knows how long, and it’s probably bad for our health. I mean, I’m not a doctor, but still. I’m

trying to be supportive but I think you need to do more to help yourself.”

Satsuki bristled indignantly, immediately becoming defensive. “What do you mean help myself?! I’m fine! Well, mostly fine, but--”

Ryuko raised a hand, effectively silencing Satsuki. “You just drank rubbing alcohol, so don’t tell me you’re fucking fine, because that’s obviously bullshit. You can’t sleep at night and you clearly have trust issues since you can’t even tell me how you’re feeling. Instead, you pull some stupid stunt like this and almost end up in the hospital again!”

Satsuki looked away, crossing her arms defensively.

“I think you should consider seeing the psychiatrist from the hospital.”

Satsuki’s head whipped around quickly, her short hair swaying with the motion. Eyes wide with fear (and something that Ryuko thought may have been betrayal), she opened her mouth to interject but Ryuko cut her off, stating “I can only do so much for you, and she genuinely wants to help. She doesn’t want to take advantage of you or anything like that. Just give it a chance!”

Desperate for any other alternative, Satsuki sputtered, “B-but you have been doing a good enough job! I mean, those breathing techniques you found online really work and you became better at stopping the panic attacks. Why can’t you just keep helping me like that? I’m not crazy,” she pleaded.

Ryuko sighed, fiddling with the hem of her shirt as she pointedly avoided Satsuki’s gaze. “Look, I don’t...I haven’t...okay, promise you won’t be mad at me, but I haven’t been totally honest with you.”

Satsuki arched an eyebrow, fixing Ryuko with her most intimidating stare. “Tell me,” she commanded, though Ryuko would never admit that the effect was lessened by her sister’s frog voice.

Ryuko scooted backwards until she was out of Satsuki’s reach before blurting out, “I’ve been seeing the psychiatrist at the hospital for you. That’s how I know all the breathing techniques and how to deal with the panic attacks and even that you needed to have boundaries with touch.”

Stunned, Satsuki stared at Ryuko, jaw hanging open in surprise. Softly, she uttered, “How much does she know?”

“Everything.” Ryuko watched as a range of emotions played themselves out in Satsuki’s eyes, everything from betrayal to fear, anger to sadness, confusion back to betrayal. Ryuko sensed a shift in the atmosphere of the room as Satsuki’s face turned to one of indignant resolve.

“Get out,” she murmured dangerously, fists clenching the blanket covering her.

Alarmed, Ryuko started, “Satsuki! I just--”

“OUT!” she bellowed, ignoring the pain that shot through her throat at the utterance.

Ryuko hesitated, giving her sister a look of scrutiny before sliding off the end of the bed and storming out, slamming the door behind her.

Satsuki sat up, fuming. *How could she do that? How can I trust her when she’s been lying to me all this time! She told a random stranger all of my secrets without my consent! She knows I want nothing to do with therapy and yet she brings it up anyways. Who does she think she is? Angry*

tears pooled in her eyes, prompting her to stand up and rip out the IV, heading towards the bathroom and ignoring the dull pounding that had begun assaulting her head. As she relieved her bladder of the extensive amount of fluid that had been given to her overnight, she angrily swiped at the tears threatening to spill over. *I'm not crazy. I don't need a psychiatrist. I'll show her that my willpower is enough to overcome these problems, and then she'll have to admit that I was right!*

Smiling smugly, she stood and washed her face and hands, making sure to thoroughly rinse off the blood that was dripping down her arm where the IV had been forcibly removed. She decided to head to the kitchen to forage for something she could eat and was surprised to find the Mankanshokus still in her home, eating food from the pantry. Upon noticing her arrival, Mako stood quickly, saluting Satsuki .

“Satsuki-sama! How are you feeling today?” she greeted through a mouth full of food. “You really should be resting since your body went through a lot last night! C'mon, let's get you back to bed!” Mako moved towards Satsuki, nearly grabbing her hand until Satsuki jerked her hand out of reach, not quite comfortable with being touched by someone she didn't know very well.

“Actually, I was thinking I might try to eat something, as I haven't eaten in a long time.”

Mr. Mankanshoku's head snapped up from the box of crackers he was currently devouring to peek at Satsuki. “I think you may not be eating solid foods for a few days until the burns inside of you heal. This takes a few days because the mouth and all that stuff heals very fast. You should only eat soft stuff like pudding and applesauce until then.”

Satsuki opened her mouth to interject but as soon as she did a spoonful of applesauce was forced into her mouth by an eager Mako. Startled, Satsuki nearly choked but managed to swallow the food without incident. Though she hated to admit it, she knew what Mr. Mankanshoku had said was true; the applesauce hurt like a bitch doing down, and she knew there was no way her insides could handle moving solid food down to her stomach. Fortunately, she noted that the pain seemed exclusive to her mouth and esophagus.

I probably threw up the alcohol before it was in my stomach long enough to burn it. Hungrily, she swiped the applesauce from Mako's hands, intent on feeding herself and proving that she was a normal, nondependent, functional member of society. Mako shrugged and turned back to the pantry, honing in on a bag of potato chips. Satsuki took her time eating, experimenting with the amount of food she attempted to swallow at once before finding that small bites hurt the least. She was craving a cup of tea but figured that the heat of the beverage would not be as pleasant as usual, so she contented herself with a glass of lukewarm water from the tap in its stead. Hunger far from satiated, she joined the Mankanshokus in her pantry, eyes sweeping the expansive shelves full of junk food and canned fruit. Spotting a can of diced peaches, she pulled it off the topmost shelf and brought it to the kitchen counter, carefully opening it with a can opener.

This doesn't really count as solid food, right? As long as I chew it enough it's basically the same as applesauce but with peaches instead. She took a tentative bite, only putting two diced peaches in her mouth at first. She chewed for what seemed like forever, pulverizing the meager amount of food in her mouth until she deemed it swallowable. It was no more painful that swallowing the applesauce, so she continued eating this way, all concentration focused on her food and definitely *not* the absence of her sister.

But, I wonder where Ryuko went? Not that I care, I don't need her to take care of me. I'm taking care of myself just fine without her.

As if sensing Satsuki's thoughts, Mako piped up, “Don't worry Satsuki-sama, Ryuko will probably be back very soon! I mean she seemed pretty mad when she left but I don't think she will be gone

for too long! Unless she doesn't come back tonight, but since we are here where else would she stay?" Satsuki nodded absentmindedly, twirling her spoon in the peaches slowly.

The day had gone by relatively quickly for Satsuki (though she had woken at noon, so there wasn't nearly as much daylight to spare as usual). Ryuko had not returned, leaving Satsuki with some conflicting feelings. She had made it through the day without assistance from Ryuko, giving her a small sense of accomplishment and adding to the arsenal of reasons *she* was right and *Ryuko* was wrong. However, as she dressed herself for bed, she found that there was an inexplicable ache in her chest, one that she found she could not attribute to the burns she'd gotten (no matter how hard she tried). Despite this, she forced herself to lie in bed, attempting to sleep and not think about her sister's words from earlier. She tossed and turned for an hour, so much so that the blankets had become a tangled mess around her, but eventually sleep (and its associated nightmares) overtook her.

Chapter 21

Satsuki watched in terror, helpless as her mother jabbed her hand through Ryuko's chest, withdrawing the life fiber infused heart and admiring it sinisterly. The organ emitted sparkles as Ryuko groaned, the pain of being impaled activating her life fiber healing ability. Stunned, Satsuki observed as Ryuko stood frozen in place as her-no, their mother-gripped the glowing heart in her hand, leering smile growing wider.

"My child, if only we had gotten to spend more time together," she lamented mockingly as she squeezed the heart into smithereens, red fibers dispersing throughout the air. Ryuko instantly dropped to the ground, her lifeless body bleeding from the gaping chest wound, the light already gone from her eyes.

"Ryuko!" Satsuki screamed, fingers fumbling for the detonator, intent on destroying the woman who'd taken her sister from her not once but twice now. In less time than it took to blink, a cold hand gripped her wrist while slim fingers extracted the device from Satsuki's hand, leaving her completely defenseless.

"Pathetic," Ragyo smirked as she grabbed Satsuki by her hair, lifting her to eye level. "Go join your sister, you worthless excuse for a daughter."

Satsuki felt herself flying through the air, landing roughly on the ground and rolling for a few feet until she was lying on her stomach face-to-face with Ryuko's body, an empty vessel that had been the sister she'd been trying to avenge. Weakly, Satsuki moved her hand forward, gripping Ryuko's still warm hand. "

I-imouto," Satsuki gasped out, the word sounding strange coming from her mouth and even stranger referring to the girl in front of her. A sharp sensation suddenly erupted on the back of her neck, and Satsuki realized a blade was pressing dangerously into her neck at the base of her skull. The last thing she heard was a dark chuckle as the blade pierced her skin, and her world went dark.

Satsuki sat up as a scream tore from her throat, the sound of it echoing around the darkened room; a cacophony of misery, fear, and grief, remnants of the all too real nightmare she'd just experienced. A sob broke from her throat as tears began cascading down her cheeks. Pulling her legs up to her chest, she rested her forehead on her knees and wept as her chest ached. Habitually, she disentangled herself from the sheets and stood, walking across the hall to Ryuko's room while clutching her chest desperately. She lifted a hand to knock on the door but froze.

If I knock does that mean Ryuko wins? Torn between her pride and admitting Ryuko was right, Satsuki swayed slightly as she cried silently, fist still held inches from the door. *Just this once*, she conceded as she rapped on the door and waited, just like every other night. However, as Satsuki waited for the door to open, time stretched on much longer than usual.

Maybe she's sleeping really deeply? She knocked again. A full minute passed before she remembered that Ryuko had yet to return after Satsuki had ejected her from her room. The Mankanshokus had left after preparing dinner for Satsuki, who was now alone in the manor. Falling to her knees, she leaned her head against the bedroom door and sniffled as tears continued their endless descent down her face.

What if something bad happened to her after she left? Then it would be my fault for being so stubborn. Images of a hand piercing Ryuko's chest flashed through her mind, causing Satsuki to

stiffen. She clutched her head, forcing the visions out and trying to convince herself that Ryuko was *fine* and would be home soon. Her body began trembling and her pulse roared in her ears; her breaths became sharp wheezes as her vision began to blur with even more tears.

A hand suddenly pressed down onto her head gently, causing her to jump. She turned to find Ryuko standing above her, face clouded by the darkness of the hallway. Ryuko walked around Satsuki and crouched, putting her at eye level with her sister. Satsuki found a stony expression plastered over Ryuko's face. Under the scrutiny of the look, Satsuki found herself recoiling slightly, a feeling washing over her that she could only describe as what one feels when they realize they've been caught doing something wrong. Lower lip trembling, Satsuki averted her gaze.

"Do you want to get better or do you want to spend every night like this?" Ryuko asked emotionlessly.

Satsuki turned frightened eyes towards Ryuko's impassive ones, attempting to communicate the feelings she couldn't verbalize: that *of course* she wanted to get better, but the process would be long and scary and frankly she didn't know if she was ready for that yet; that putting so much trust in a doctor she barely knew was a daunting task; that she feared it wouldn't help and she'd be a blubbering mess for the rest of her life, a shell of a person mirroring the normalcy that she'd faked for the past thirteen years.

Ryuko regarded her intently before sighing and standing up. Afraid that her message had not been received, Satsuki opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Ryuko's hand grabbing her own and pulling her up into a standing position. She opened the door and pulled Satsuki inside by the hand until they made it to the bed, where she relinquished her grip to free herself of her tennis shoes and jacket. Abruptly, Ryuko placed a hand on each Satsuki's trembling shoulders, forcing her to look her in the eye.

"I have been here for you since the beginning, and I'll be with you as long as you need me to. I'm not going anywhere, so get that through your thick skull right now. I'm here for you and you're not alone in this. Now stop being a stubborn idiot and realize that this is serious."

Satsuki relaxed ever so slightly as Ryuko's words brought her some comfort.

"I've been doing my best to help you, but I can't do more than I'm currently doing, and it's not enough. I know it's shitty for you, but it hurts me to see you like this and not be able to do anything to make you better." Her voice wavered, and Satsuki was surprised to find that her eyes were not the only ones filled with tears. "I don't wanna lose you but sometimes I feel like I already have," she admitted, pulling Satsuki into a hug. Satsuki responded in kind, moving her hands to clutch at the back of Ryuko shirt as she held her close. A sob broke from Ryuko, startling Satsuki. She pulled away from Satsuki and rubbed her eyes.

"Heh, sorry about that," she sniffled. "This is supposed to be about you, not my shitty feelings."

"Ryuko, I--"

"Save it," Ryuko muttered, intertwining her fingers with Satsuki's and guiding her to the awaiting bed. "I'll be fine, don't worry about me." As they nestled under the covers, Satsuki found herself reflecting on Ryuko's words. A thought popped into her head, and she realized that she had to get better for Ryuko's sake. *I've been selfish. I haven't been thinking about Ryuko's feelings at all because I've been caught up in my own weakness. She's done so much for me and I haven't shown any gratitude; I've just expected her to stay and take care of me. And now she's crying because of me and it's all my fault!*

“Judging by the look on your face, you’re blaming yourself for making me cry, aren’t you?” Ryuko laughed. “Not everything is your fault, so stop blaming yourself. I’m just tired and emotional, ya know?”

Satsuki laid a gentle hand over Ryuko’s cheek, cupping her face, causing Ryuko’s breath to hitch and her face to heat up. “Ryuko, I...” she hesitated, biting her lip as she considered what to say next. “I want to get better. For you. Because you are...the most important person to me. You’ve saved my life multiple times and I owe you for that, at least.”

Even if I don’t particularly care about what happens to me, Ryuko cares and I can’t keep hurting her like this. If I have to live for her until I can live for myself, then so be it.

“I will...go see the psychiatrist, if you really think it will help,” she conceded, breath shaky, “but I want you to come with me because I don’t think I can do it alone.”

Abruptly, Ryuko’s arms shot forward, wrapping around Satsuki’s neck and pulling her close. Ryuko buried her head in Satsuki’s neck and cried with relief, taking Satsuki by surprise. She contented herself with stroking Ryuko’s hair as her sister cried into her neck, dampening her shirt. *How the tables have turned*, Satsuki mused, recalling the many nights that Ryuko had undoubtedly fallen asleep with a soaking wet shirt.

“Thanks, nee-san,” Ryuko mumbled into her neck. The breathy words caused a shudder to run down Satsuki’s spine, though she wasn’t sure why. Ryuko pulled away and found Satsuki’s hand in the darkness.

“I hope this isn’t too forward or too soon, but I already have an appointment tomorrow with Dr. Mahmoud and I think you should come with me,” she murmured as she wiped away her own tears with her free hand. She immediately detected the way Satsuki’s hand became clammy, her body beginning to tremble ever so slightly. “You could just sit there and listen to us talk, you know, to get a handle on what it’s like if you’re more comfortable with that, since it’ll be your first time going. You wouldn’t even have to talk if you don’t wanna.”

Satsuki deflated, letting out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding, before whispering a reluctant, “Okay.” Despite the darkness surrounding them, Satsuki could tell Ryuko had broken out into a huge smile.

“Awesome!” she exclaimed, snuggling closer to Satsuki and holding her tightly.

Relaxing into the touch, Satsuki allowed herself to close her eyes and drift off to sleep, red fibers filling her dreams and fending off the ghosts of her past.

Chapter 22

The morning went by in a blur for Satsuki, who was beginning to regret agreeing to see the psychiatrist on such short notice. *Some time to prepare would have been nice*, she thought as anxiety gripped her, *but I already told Ryuko I would come with her and if I back out now she will be so disappointed*. However, her willingness to make her sister feel better did little to assuage her fear as the car brought them closer and closer to the hospital. It was only the presence of Ryuko's hand in her own that kept her grounded enough to walk into the hospital without hyperventilating, though she was still considering escape routes as Ryuko led her to the elevators. *I wonder how long it'd take to gnaw off my arm?*

In the solitude of the elevator, Ryuko, who'd been silent most of the morning, turned to Satsuki and said, "I know you're nervous but everything is gonna be fine. I'll be there with you the whole time and if you're uncomfortable we can cut the appointment short. Sound good?"

Numbly, Satsuki nodded, wanting nothing more than to get this over with as fast as possible. Ryuko half-guided, half-dragged Satsuki down the hall to the door marked with the psychiatrist's name before knocking twice and peeking her head in. She turned to face Satsuki and explained, "I'm gonna tell her you're here and that you are just gonna observe today, alright? Don't go anywhere," she warned teasingly, unaware of how much the warning was actually needed, before disappearing behind the door.

Immediately, Satsuki brought her thumb up to her mouth and began gnawing on her nail nervously as her eyes darted up and down the hallway. *I could leave now and probably outrun her or at least find a decent hiding place in this huge building*. Her rational thought kicked in then, reminding her, *You're doing this for Ryuko. If you leave now, she will be crushed*. Sighing, she rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, wiping her sweaty palms against her pants. *It's just an hour. You've endured worse than this. Just sit there and fall asleep with your eyes open if that's what it takes to get through this*.

She clenched her fists, ready for this to be over with, when the door opened. Ryuko gestured for her to enter and she walked in stiffly, giving a curt nod to the therapist before sitting on the side of the couch furthest from the doctor's chair. Obviously much more at home than Satsuki had anticipated, Ryuko sprawled out over the remaining space on the couch, legs hanging over the armrest and head inches from Satsuki's thigh.

The psychiatrist sat in the chair and folded her hands, regarding the girls for a moment before stating, "Hello, I am Dr. Mahmoud. I know we've met before but it has been awhile. Ryuko here has explained that you will merely be observing today and that I am not supposed to ask you anything. However, if you would like to speak up, feel free to do so. This is a judgment-free zone and everything will be kept confidential, of course."

Satsuki nodded once, refusing to return eye contact; instead, she seemed to be attempting to bore a hole through the wall in front of her with her gaze alone.

Turning her attention to Ryuko, the doctor asked, "So, Ryuko, is there anything new to report since our last session?"

"Yeah, actually, a bunch of shit went down a few days ago when we were on our way to buy groceries." Satsuki's grip on the armrest increased, her knuckles whitening noticeably. "A group of punks tried to rob us but we managed to fight them off," Ryuko proclaimed smugly.

“Interesting,” Dr. Mahmoud muttered, scribbling something in her notebook before turning back to Ryuko. “How did the two of you react to this incident?”

“Well, I could tell Satsuki was about to have a panic attack as one of those dudes was holding her, so once I took him down I got her somewhere quiet and did the distraction stuff to keep her mind off of it. It worked, thank god, because my paper bag got ruined in the fight,” she scowled.

“Very good. A panic attack that can be stopped is much more desirable than one that spirals out of control. It sounds like you did a good job,” she remarked, offering Ryuko a small smile, which filled Ryuko’s chest with pride. “Tell me about the rest of that night,” the doctor prompted.

Ryuko’s eyes flitted upwards to Satsuki’s face, making sure that she was still not looking at the happenings in the room, before giving the doctor a conspiratory look. A tiny nod from the woman conveyed that the message had been received, so Ryuko began recounting the story. “Well, we went home after that. I must’ve fallen asleep because I woke up in my bed. I decided to check on Satsuki ‘cus she had a really nasty bruise on her side from the scuffle. When I went into her room, there was a half-empty bottle of rubbing alcohol on the nightstand and I could hear her spewing her guts out in the bathroom.”

Satsuki’s eyebrow twitched and she pursed her lips. *She knows I didn’t drink that much, so why did she say that I did?*

“I went to the bathroom and she was, like, stumbling around and shit. It looked like she had thrown up a lot of blood,” Ryuko continued.

That’s not true either...I only threw up the alcohol and stomach acid. Her mouth opened slightly, rebuttal ready to be delivered, but she paused, waiting.

Detecting that her efforts were slowly working, Ryuko thought of her next fabrication, knowing it would have to be profound to get Satsuki to comment. “I asked her why she drank it and she said she wanted to die,” she blurted out, hoping it would have the desired effect. It did.

“Ryuko, that’s not true and you know it. I only drank a tiny bit of the alcohol. Like, not even a mouthful. I definitely did not throw up any blood either. And I specifically told you that I just wanted to sleep, not die. Do you always tell lies like this to her?” she asked, finally turning her gaze away from the wall to look at Ryuko indignantly.

“It seems your sister is not the best story teller. Perhaps you’d like to tell me what happened in your own words?” Dr. Mahmoud ventured, hoping that Ryuko had been right earlier when she’d predicted that getting Satsuki to talk during this session would be easy; if it involved Satsuki being right and Ryuko being wrong, Ryuko was sure Satsuki would jump at the chance.

Satsuki cleared her throat, still sore from the potent liquid she’d ingested, and turned to face the doctor, crossing her arms as she did so. “Since this airhead is unable to properly relay what happened, I supposed I will have to. I drank the alcohol, but only half a mouthful. The rest I spit out because I couldn’t swallow it because it burned so badly. I did throw up, but it was only the alcohol and stomach acid that came up. No blood. She called her friend over, whose dad is a doctor, and they took care of me during the night. The next morning Ryuko asked me if I drank it to kill myself and I said ‘No.’ I only drank it because I wanted to sleep through the night without having any nightmares and I told her that, so I don’t know why she said I did it because I wanted to die,” she squinted, turning suspicious eyes towards Ryuko, who had an innocent look on her face.

“Is that so? Ryuko, what do you think of your sister’s testimony?”

Ryuko shrugged awkwardly from her laying position. "I suppose that sounds familiar," she said, doing her best to keep a neutral expression. Satsuki opened her mouth to argue, but was cut off by Dr. Mahmoud addressing Ryuko.

"It is important to give me correct details, okay?" The twinkle in her eye was not lost on Ryuko, who was glad that the psychiatrist was able to catch on so quickly to the ruse.

"Yeah, yeah, alright," she muttered, feigning frustration.

Addressing no one in particular, the therapist inquired, "Anyway, how have the nightmares been?"

Satsuki bit her lip and looked back to the wall, ignoring the question. Taking this as a cue to speak, Ryuko explained, "She still has them pretty much every night at the exact same time. Right about 3 in the morning I can expect her to be knocking at my door. It's strange, really."

"I'd say it probably has something to do with her sleep cycle. It's likely that, as she is dreaming around that time, she is in her third cycle of REM sleep, otherwise known as the time in which we dream. Typically, once that stage of dreaming ends, we move back to stage two or three, which is less deep than REM sleep and that's why it's easier to wake up at that time. This is why the dreams are more easily remembered at this point, too."

"Interesting," Ryuko commented, deep in thought. She could tell Satsuki also found it intriguing despite the fact that her gaze had not wavered; the furrowing of her eyebrows gave her away.

"Would the two of you say you wake up feeling rested in the morning?"

Ryuko chuckled. "Fuck no. I have to take a nap usually just to make it through the day. Satsuki is usually with her friends during the day though, so I dunno how she feels." Reaching her arm up, she gently punched Satsuki's thigh, causing her to twitch. "Oi, are you as tired as I am or what?" She knew she needn't ask, as the dark bags under her sister's eyes gave her away, but she was intent on getting Satsuki used to speaking here, so she prodded anyway.

Satsuki sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Of course I'm tired. I haven't had a full night of sleep in months," she admitted.

"After you go to Ryuko's room, do you have any nightmares after that?" the doctor questioned curiously, despite the fact that she'd said she wouldn't ask Satsuki anything.

Briefly, Satsuki considered the question. There was no doubt that she had nightmares before going to Ryuko's room, but had she ever had one once she was in there? She thought back to the many nights she'd spent sobbing into Ryuko's chest, crying herself to sleep in her sister's arms, then waking up still tangled in her sister's limbs. Now that she thought about it, she was pretty sure she hadn't had a nightmare in the confines of Ryuko's room, nestled safely under the covers in her sister's embrace. Her jaw dropped open at the realization.

"No," she breathed, "I don't think I have had one when I'm sleeping with Ryuko," she divulged incredulously.

"Nah, there was that night when you drank that shit that you were having one in your room, but when I grabbed your hand and talked to you, you just kinda...rode it out before calming down. You didn't wake up though," Ryuko remarked, rubbing her chin pensively.

Closing her eyes in concentration, Satsuki mentioned, "I remember that one. I was having a nightmare and I was with *her*. But before she could do anything bad a life fiber stroked my hand and then swallowed her, and then she was gone. The fibers covered me up and unchained me and

calmed me down. Then I don't remember anything after that."

"Well that must've been when I was holding your hand and shit," Ryuko deduced, sitting up excitedly and facing Satsuki with her legs folded under her.

"The same thing happened last night after I came to your room and fell asleep. It was like life fibers were protecting me from bad dreams." Satsuki had also turned to face her sister, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. The room seemed to fall away as they looked at each other, passing ideas back and forth. "Maybe if we just always slept together, I wouldn't have nightmares anymore!"

"And I- I mean we- could finally get a full night's sleep!" Ryuko practically shouted in her excitement.

As the girls collaborated, Dr. Mahmoud smiled as she jotted down some notes in her notebook. Hopefully, the fact that the revelation about her nightmares had occurred while in therapy would encourage Satsuki to come back and work on the many other issues she faced. A quick glance at her watch revealed that only 15 minutes of the session remained.

"I'd like to propose a sort of challenge for the two of you. If you are comfortable with it, I think the two of you should sleep together each night until next week's session. If this is successful in controlling the nightmares and you are both comfortable with the arrangement, then I see no reason for it to stop. However, if it is not effective there are numerous sleeping medications that we can try to help you be better rested. Does that sound reasonable?"

Both girls nodded fervently.

"In that case I think we have made enough progress for today, so I'm willing to let you leave early, unless there's something else either of you would like to discuss?" Satsuki shook her head no, still intent on leaving as soon as possible, but Ryuko piped up before she could interject.

"What about her anxiety and all the panic attacks? What do we do in the meantime about those?" Satsuki froze, the color draining from her face. She was definitely *not* ready to talk about these things, fearing that something unpleasant could trigger an attack there and then, and she definitely did not want this woman to have to witness it.

Sensing her distress, Dr. Mahmoud shook her head, stating, "We don't have anywhere near enough time left to cover something so complex. Just keep doing what you've been doing and we can talk about it next week, alright?"

Satsuki deflated ever so slightly in relief. Satisfied, Ryuko stood stuffed her hands in her pockets. "Ready, Sats?"

"Yes," she murmured, following Ryuko out of the office after offering a small goodbye wave to the doctor.

Chapter 23

The first night was awkward, to say the least. Typically, when Satsuki would join Ryuko in bed after a nightmare, they were both exhausted beyond having inhibitions, acting more on instinct than anything. Their hands knew where and how to hold to provide maximum comfort. However, without the haziness that came with being awakened so late, they both seemed to be overthinking the whole ordeal. Ryuko was worried that Satsuki would not react to touch in the same way as when she was desperate for affection, while Satsuki fretted over how much of a burden she must have been while clinging to Ryuko all those other nights. Hence, the two of them found themselves in Ryuko's bed, laying on their backs with three feet between them.

Deciding to break the silence, Ryuko turned to face Satsuki, who appeared to be stiff as a board. "What if, like, it only works if we're touching?" she commented as casually as possible.

Sighing, Satsuki turned her head to face Ryuko. "I don't know," she admitted, brows furrowing.

"Why don't you, uh...how about...you can be closer to me if you want," Ryuko stammered out, blush creeping over her cheeks at her inability to speak clearly (or was it something else?).

Satsuki regarded her carefully before whispering, "I don't want to be a burden."

"A burden? What do you mean? I love sleeping with you! Okay, wait, that came out wrong, holy shit. I mean I don't mind when you, like, need me to hold you. I...kinda like snuggling with you," she muttered, flustered and beyond embarrassed. Satsuki regarded her silently, making Ryuko nervous. "I mean, if you don't wanna be touched right now, that's cool too. We could just hold hands if that makes you feel better," Ryuko suggested.

Though Satsuki didn't verbally answer, Ryuko could tell she agreed by the movement under the covers, a small lump gravitating towards Ryuko's side of the bed. Ryuko's hand found her sister's under the covers and gripped it reassuringly before turning the bedside lamp off and scooting closer to Satsuki, leaving only a foot of space between them. Ryuko curled into herself, leaving her arm extended to allow Satsuki enough access to her hand.

Tiredly, she murmured, "If you need to, you can get as close as you want." Her eyelids fluttered shut and her breathing slowed after a few minutes, leaving Satsuki alone with her thoughts.

Despite her exhaustion, she found she could not fall asleep. She shifted onto her side to face Ryuko's peaceful form. A sudden need for physical contact erupted inside of her, leaving her conflicted. *If I do anything now, I'll wake her up. But she said I could get closer if I wanted...* Her fingers, still resting in Ryuko's limp hand, twitched at the thought. Despite her hesitation, she carefully inched closer to Ryuko. Ryuko's position left no space for Satsuki to squeeze into, so she contented herself with merely laying near Ryuko, her grip on Ryuko's hand never faltering. The warmth radiating from Ryuko calmed Satsuki, allowing her to finally relax and fall asleep.

Satsuki woke slowly, awakened by the oppressive heat that was surrounding her. Groggily, she pushed the covers off and relished the cool air gracing her skin. A quick glance at the bedside clock revealed it to be half past 5AM. A gentle sensation on her back caused her to pause. She realized that Ryuko was spooning her, her arm wrapped loosely around Satsuki's waist and her nose pressed ever so slightly against her back. Subconsciously, Satsuki intertwined her fingers with her sister's before drifting back to sleep.

The scent of breakfast wafted into the bedroom, causing Satsuki to stir. Her eyes snapped open when she realized how hungry she was. She found herself alone in Ryuko's bed. A quick glance at the bedside clock showed the time to be 11:30AM. She stared at the ceiling for a few moments, relishing the comfortable silence that surrounded her before hopping out of bed with a considerable amount of energy. She stretched agilely, eliciting a few cracks from her joints, then made her way to the kitchen. Satsuki found Ryuko standing at the stove tending to a tea kettle and a frying pan, deep in concentration.

"Good morning," Satsuki greeted as she approached Ryuko, peering over her shoulder at the meal being prepared.

"Hey," Ryuko smiled, tending to some scrambled eggs before flipping over some hashbrowns in a separate pan. "I tried to think of foods that would be soft enough for your throat or whatever, so I hope you like eggs and hashbrowns." Satsuki hummed an affirmation as she pulled a teacup from the cupboard and placed it on the counter, waiting patiently for the kettle to whistle. "Oi, I'll take care of that. Wanna set the table?" Ryuko asked, pulling the fully cooked food from the stove and setting it on the countertop. Satsuki shrugged but did as she was told, setting a place for the two of them at the kitchen table and pouring some orange juice into a glass for Ryuko. As she sat down, Ryuko plopped the heaping plates of food onto the table and turned back to the now screeching kettle. Carefully, she poured the liquid into the teacup and steadily carried it to Satsuki, placing it on the table near her. She then sat across from Satsuki and proudly admired the food she'd prepared before shoveling her creations onto her plate.

While she ate voraciously, Satsuki helped herself to her own portions of food, though the burns inside of her prevented her from eating as quickly as Ryuko. She noticed, however, that the pain had decreased greatly from the past couple of days, making eating a much more rewarding experience.

Between mouthfuls of food, Ryuko asked, "How'd you sleep? I feel great! I don't think I woke up even once. I feel like a new person!"

"I woke up once, around 5, but I fell back asleep almost immediately. I think I only woke up because I was really hot. No nightmares," she smiled shyly, hoping not to jinx her progress. She could barely believe it herself; this was the first time since she'd been in a coma that she had not suffered from the debilitating visions that haunted her sleep. "I guess I feel well-rested for the first time in a while," she pondered out loud, reveling in the sensation.

"Yo I dunno why we didn't think of this earlier. I mean you basically came to my bed every night so we shoulda just had you start out in my room instead of having all that fuss at 3 in the morning," Ryuko chuckled, sipping from her juice. "So what'd you think of therapy?" she asked cautiously, watching Satsuki's reaction as casually as she could muster.

"I suppose it wasn't as bad as I imagined. I am interested to see if this sleeping arrangement actually works all the time though. Of course, does that mean we would have to sleep together indefinitely? And what if we are separated for some reason? I can't just use you as a crutch because you might not always be here."

"We could ask Dr. Mahmoud about the meds in that case, or see if she has any other ideas about it," Ryuko suggested. Satsuki hummed in agreement as she chewed on her eggs, deep in thought.

The rest of the nights that week went by without a hitch, though their luck during the daytime hours was less than ideal. It seemed that the extra energy she had from the uninterrupted nights of sleep had converted itself into a sort of nervous energy that she could not dispel. This, in turn, led to Satsuki becoming more high-strung and more prone to anxiety attacks. The hope she'd felt at the beginning of the week had suffered greatly. She found herself feeling as though she were in a lose-lose situation. Was it better to wake terrified each night, sacrificing sleep so that the panic attacks during the day were decreased, or was it better to get adequate sleep but use the energy to fuel the panic attacks? It was with thoughts like these that she accompanied Ryuko to their second joint therapy session.

Once settled on the couch, in the same positions as the week before, Dr. Mahmoud greeted the girls and made small talk for a few minutes. She could tell Satsuki was radiating waves of anxiety and was determined to make her feel more at ease by starting the session out casually. Satsuki's leg bounced up and down, betraying the stoic demeanor she was trying to uphold. After the chat, the doctor decided to get down to business, finding that Satsuki did not seem as though she were going to calm down any time soon.

"Alright girls, I'm very curious as to how the sleeping arrangement worked out for the two of you," she started.

Ryuko perked up slightly and explained, "It's been good and bad, I think. It's like, we both have been sleeping through the night and she hasn't had any nightmares since we started sleeping together, so we are totally more rested and refreshed in the mornings. I don't even have to take naps anymore. But ever since then, I guess it brought up a new problem."

"Is that so? What happened?"

"She's a lot more high-strung than usual and she had way more panic attacks this week than any other week. I had to fucking buy paper bags in bulk because we're going through them so fast."

Satsuki rolled her eyes as she bit on her thumbnail. *Leave it to Ryuko to exaggerate the hell out of everything.*

"So the nightmare situation seems resolved for now, but a new issue has taken its place. Does there seem to be a specific thing that is triggering the attacks, or are they random?"

Ryuko glanced at Satsuki before replying, "To me they seem random, but I don't see things the way she does, so maybe it's not as random as I thought."

Satsuki's brows furrowed. *I've never really thought about if something was triggering them. I mean there was that time we were attacked, and the time I told Ryuko about everything, but other than that I haven't really paid much attention.* "I haven't really paid much attention to whether something specific was causing them, I suppose," Satsuki admitted. "I just kind of feel like I become more and more wound up until it finally lets loose."

"I see," the psychiatrist murmured, scribbling in her notebook. She stood, walked to her desk, and opened the bottom drawer, withdrawing a diary-sized notebook from its recesses. She offered it to Satsuki, who accepted it warily. "I'm going to ask you to try and hold out for one more week," she stated as she sat back in her chair and sipped from her coffee mug. "It is important that we identify any triggers you have so that it will be easier for you to avoid those triggers, or at least prepare yourself to face them if they are unavoidable. I hate to ask this of you, but would you be willing to record the time, date, duration, and cause of each panic attack you have in the next week? Obviously this is not the most comfortable thing to endure, so if you prefer not to, that is fine. I can prescribe some antianxiety medication in the meantime, if you feel you are having too many to

handle.”

Satsuki shrugged noncommittally, avoiding eye contact. Ryuko punched her arm.

“What the fuck,” growled Satsuki as she rubbed her arm.

“Don’t give her a hard time, just answer the damn question, ya dumbass,” Ryuko shot back.

“Ryuko, it’s quite alright for Satsuki to answer as she sees fit. If she is uncomfortable, you should give her some time to mull it over.”

Simultaneously, both girls stuck their tongues out at each other before crossing their arms and huffing. Aiming to diffuse the tension, the therapist addressed Satsuki.

“How about we try this: instead of waiting until next week, I can call you halfway through the week to see how you’re doing. If there has been no progress towards identifying triggers or decreasing the frequencies of the attacks, I can call in a prescription for some antianxiety medications to get you through until our next appointment. Does that sound like something you can handle?”

Satsuki shrugged again but nodded. *Ahh, what the hell. I’ve gone this long dealing with them. What’s a few more days?*

The doctor dedicated the rest of the appointment time towards teaching Satsuki techniques to calm herself, remove herself from certain situations, and reorient herself during and after an attack. At the end of the appointment, the sisters left the office, hoping for the next week to bring some progress without adding any more disappointments.

Chapter 24

Three days filled with an average of three panic attacks daily had put Satsuki on edge. She found that she could not find a common factor that precipitated her panic attacks, save for the rising anxiety that seemed to precede them. Still, she diligently recorded the information that the psychiatrist had requested in some vain hope that perhaps the doctor would see something that she had missed. Sitting on her couch, Satsuki glanced every few minutes at the phone, hoping that Dr. Mahmoud would call soon.

The loud ringing startled her, despite the fact that she'd been anticipating the call. Almost desperately she picked up the phone and uttered a shaky, "Hello?"

"Good afternoon Satsuki, it's Dr. Mahmoud. How have you been?"

"Not too great, actually," Satsuki admitted, biting her bottom lip.

"I take it you've still been having panic attacks, eh? Have you found anything that seems to trigger them?"

"Not really. I wrote everything down that you asked but it didn't seem like there was a pattern."

"Well, I had a cancellation today, so if you'd like to come in and have me review what's been going on, that is a possibility. I could also give you some antianxiety medications to help with the attacks if you're interested in that."

"Oh, uh, well, Ryuko's out shopping right now and I don't know if she would be able to make it," Satsuki hesitated.

A few seconds of silence passed before Dr. Mahmoud replied, "It could be a one-on-one session if you're comfortable with that."

Satsuki blanched. *One-on-one with the psychiatrist? Fuck. I don't know if I'm ready for that yet.* She suddenly found herself waging a war internally.

Just a few days ago you were saying that you can't keep using Ryuko as a crutch.

Okay, but what if I need her for something? What if I start having a panic attack in the office and she's not there to calm me down?

It is literally the doctor's job to take care of you like that. And anyway, since when does the indomitable Satsuki Kiryuin need someone to hold her hand through something as simple as a doctor appointment? You know how to do the breathing exercises to get through this yourself. And besides, if anything you should go for the medication at least.

Satsuki sighed before answering. "What time can you see me?"

An hour and a half later, Satsuki stood outside the psychiatrist's office, unsteady hands clutching the notebook. She gave herself a mental pep talk before raising a shaking fist to the door and knocking. A quiet "come in" filtered through the door, so Satsuki gripped the doorknob and pushed the door open. The doctor was sitting at her desk, looking through a file distractedly as Satsuki entered. As Satsuki approached, she closed the folder and slid it away from the center of

her desk.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” she commented.

“Neither did I,” Satsuki responded, chuckling nervously. She offered the notebook to the psychiatrist before retreating to the couch, where she began fiddling with some loose threads on the armrest. The doctor flipped through the entries in the notebook, studying each one carefully before turning her attention to Satsuki.

“When you have panic attacks, where do they normally occur?”

“Besides the one I had after we were attacked, I think they’ve all been at my home,” Satsuki responded, pulling harder at the threads of the couch.

The doctor was silent for a moment as she pondered just how much Satsuki would be willing to divulge in their impromptu session without having Ryuko acting as her security blanket. “Where you live right now...is it the same house you grew up in?”

Satsuki nodded absently.

“Is this where the majority of the abuse took place?” she asked quietly, fixing Satsuki with a concerned look.

Satsuki froze as memories of her earliest abuse began flashing through her mind, causing her to lose focus. She couldn’t move, couldn’t talk; she could only sit on the couch, reliving her worst memories. Her body began trembling as she lost her grip with reality.

The house? The house, the house, the house... The thought echoed through her head, a mantra of pain and realization. The house where I’ve never felt safe, even when I was there alone, or even when I was there with Ryuko...Ragyo has always been there, her presence has always been there, despite her death. She won’t ever leave me alone. Even in death she is still fucking with me! I can’t escape her clutches...I’m stuck living like this, aren’t I? And they just want to give me drugs to deal with it like some kind of crazy person! Why can’t they just let me live?!

“Satsuki.”

A gentle voice coming from in front of her snapped her out of her daze. She blinked and found herself face-to-face with Dr. Mahmoud, who was crouching in front of her. Taking a deep breath, Satsuki exhaled slowly, automatically beginning the breathing exercises that had become routine for her.

“Very good,” Dr. Mahmoud murmured calmly, “you’re doing great. You are safe here. She can’t hurt you anymore.”

Tears sprung into Satsuki’s eyes. “She still is hurting me, though,” she choked out between breaths.

“Sometimes, the next step towards healing can be a change of scenery. Have you ever considered moving out of your childhood home, perhaps into a small house or even an apartment? I believe living in the same place as where the abuse took place is impeding your ability to cope. It’s serving as a subconscious reminder of the past, almost like a conditioned response. You did not feel safe there, so you learned to always have your guard up, watching your back at all times. Now, however, it’s possible that the response cannot be unlearned because of the severity and duration of the trauma.”

Satsuki absorbed the information, hiccupping occasionally as she attempted to stop her tears from

falling by sheer willpower alone.

“The panic attacks can be controlled through medications and therapy, but removing potential stressors is also an important part of preventing the attacks.”

Feeling completely drained, Satsuki leaned against the back of the couch, eyes half-lidded. Sensing that the worst of her distress had passed, the doctor stood and moved back to her desk, pulling a prescription pad from the bottom drawer and beginning to write out some prescription orders.

“I just want this to be over,” Satsuki muttered to herself. The psychiatrist’s ears perked up at that statement, despite the fact that she probably had not been meant to hear it.

“What do you mean by that?” she inquired, giving Satsuki her full attention.

Satsuki hesitated before monotonously explaining, “I’m so tired of everything. I don’t want to be scared all the time or find myself against a wall trying to catch my breath. Sometimes it’s even a chore to hang out with my closest friends. Everything is so overwhelming and yet so mundane. Now I’m in therapy like a crazy person and I need medications just to make it through the day. It’s too much.”

“There is absolutely nothing wrong with taking care of your mental health. Mental health is just as real and valid as physical health, so it is important not to neglect taking care of that aspect of yourself. You are not crazy, despite what the stigma against mental health may say. You have a treatable problem, but it takes work, just like managing any other long-term disease. It may seem hopeless now, but you have only just begun the process of healing, and it may take more time than you are used to, but that does not make you crazy or your problems any less valid.”

Satsuki remained mute, wishing the couch would swallow her up then and there.

“Have you ever thought about suicide?” the doctor probed, knowing that the answer to this question was a vital part of planning proper care.

Satsuki winced slightly at the bluntness of the question. She bit her lip.

The psychiatrist could tell that her patient was struggling with deciding whether or not answering would be a good idea, so she reminded her, “Remember, everything that happens between us is confidential. I can’t even tell Ryuko what you tell me.” Scared blue eyes bored into her own, but she watched as the fear dissipated slightly, replaced with a strange mixture of defeat and determination. Crossing her arms over her chest, Satsuki sighed before speaking.

“When I was growing up, it was never an option. I had my mission and the obligation I felt kept me strong enough to weather the abuse. The first time I thought about it was when I was being held captive underground. The torture was...on a whole different level, one that I’d never experienced. Of course, hanging from my wrists left me with no way of doing it myself. I started wishing that my mother would just kill me but I was always disappointed when she left for the night and I was still alive.” Her grip on her biceps tightened, a vain attempt at protecting herself from events long since past.

“After she died, I felt like I didn’t have a purpose anymore. The one thing I’d spent my life doing was no longer looming over me, but instead of feeling free I just felt empty. I offered to sacrifice myself without hesitation to settle the scores. I suppose I had no regard for my own life then.” A blank look passed over her face as she continued. “Now it’s more like I do not care what happens to me. Not actively searching out ways to end it, but not exactly opposed to something like being hit by a car or some other freak accident to put me out of my misery.”

Dr. Mahmoud nodded silently as she listened to Satsuki. She ripped the prescriptions she'd written up earlier off of the pad before bringing her pen down to the paper once more.

"Satsuki, you are incredibly brave for continuing to live, and I know that your sister and I are definitely proud of you for holding on. I have some medications that I want you to start taking. This one," she paused, holding up one of the scripts, "is for Ativan. It is a fast-acting drug that will calm you down if you feel the precursory anxiety that signals a panic attack or, if a panic attack begins, it can end it faster." She fixed Satsuki with a pointed gaze. "This drug may cause dependence and frankly, with your history of alcohol abuse, I should be hesitant about prescribing it. However, I believe that it is safer for you to use this as opposed to resorting to alcohol again." Her gaze softened as she picked up a second script.

"This one is a prescription for Prozac. It is an antidepressant that can be effective when taken regularly. Hopefully, it will help with the feelings of emptiness and the thoughts about death. It is crucial that you take this everyday at the same time. Do not stop taking it abruptly or you may experience seizures. It will take a few weeks for some results, so don't give up on it."

Satsuki was listening intently. As much as she wanted to feel normal, she wasn't sure she even knew what normal was. Plus, it all sounded like a lot of work, being stuck on a regimen of pills for the rest of her life. The crinkling of paper drew her attention once more.

"This last one is for a week's supply of sleeping pills. I know that your current sleeping arrangement seems to be effective at preventing nightmares but, should Ryuko ever be unavailable, these should knock you out for the whole night. I'm only giving you seven pills because, once again, they have the potential for abuse. Do you feel confident that you can handle all of this?" she concluded.

Satsuki nodded, suddenly eager to end the appointment she had not wanted to attend in the first place.

"Bring these down to the pharmacy on the first floor and they will fill it while you wait," she stated as she passed the scripts to Satsuki. "I'll see you at your next appointment," she offered as a goodbye, prompting Satsuki to stand and make her way towards the door.

She found herself standing at the doors of the manor, bag of medications clutched in her hand. Her heart was pounding loudly, too loudly, in her ears as she stared up at her home.

Can I even call this place my home?

She pushed the creaking door open and stepped into the foyer. As if she'd had a missing sense restored, suddenly she could sense Ragyo's presence everywhere. She felt it in the drafts that blew through the manor, caressing her skin like icy tendrils; she felt it in the emptiness that was all-encompassing, leaving her with a permanent feeling of unease; she felt it in the darkness that seemed too deep in unlit rooms, devoid of even the tiniest bit of warmth. She'd identified the ghost permeating the house, allowing her to finally see it clearly.

Satsuki couldn't help feeling like she'd just been punched in the stomach. She gasped and fell to her hands and knees, taking in heaving breaths as the manor seemed to close in on her, suffocating her. A warm hand gently splayed itself out over Satsuki's back as Ryuko appeared in front of her, concern etched over her features. Ryuko crouched down and gently rubbed circles over Satsuki's trembling shoulder blades, murmuring words that Satsuki could not decipher over the sound of her own breathing.

Regaining some sense, Satsuki tore open the bag of medications and frantically searched for the antianxiety pills. She shakily opened the container and popped a pill into her mouth, swallowing it dry.

“Take me outside,” she wheezed as she sat back on her haunches, clutching at the tightness in her chest. Obediently, Ryuko pulled one of Satsuki’s arms over her shoulders and stood, pulling Satsuki up with her. She snaked a hand gently around her sister’s waist in an attempt to steady her as they took the few steps towards the front door. The instant that they’d passed through the doorway, the constriction in Satsuki’s chest had lessened, allowing her to breathe normally. Relief flooded through her as Ryuko led her down to the bottom step, where they both plopped down. When her heart rate and breathing returned to normal, Satsuki murmured a quiet “Thanks” to Ryuko.

“What happened?” Ryuko asked. “Where were you today?”

“I went to the psychiatrist’s office so she could look at the notebook.”

“Wait, you went to Dr. Mahmoud’s office? Alone? *Willingly?!?*” Ryuko screeched in surprise.

Satsuki nodded, rolling her eyes as she did so.

“So what did she say? What’d you guys talk about?”

“Well, she figured out that all of the panic attacks happened inside the manor, so she suggested that I move somewhere else since the house has too much painful history,” Satsuki recounted. “Plus she gave me some medications to try for the anxiety and...stuff.” She balked, deciding to omit the part about the extent of her depression and the suicide talk. “Basically, I don’t think I can live here anymore, now that I know it’s aggravating my symptoms,” she stated with barely concealed disdain, hatred for her mother flaring up inside of her.

“Well, in that case, wanna look at houses online?” Ryuko offered cheerfully, aiming to take Satsuki’s mind off of whatever was bothering her.

Satsuki gave Ryuko a skeptical look. “I can do it myself. You will probably want to move back in with the Mankanshokus once I move, so I should take care of it,” she muttered, gazing at her lap dejectedly. She could already feel the sting of Ryuko’s hypothetical rejection. She suddenly felt the very *real* sting of Ryuko’s fist colliding with her upper arm. Satsuki couldn’t contain a yelp of surprise and pain. She turned to face Ryuko’s indignant visage.

“Idiot! If you move, I’m coming with you,” she growled. “How else would you ever sleep at night?” she added, face softening as her eyebrows waggled.

“Are you sure? You have already given up so much to help me and I cannot help but feel that I am inconveniencing or taking advantage of you.”

“Fuck that. It’s not like I have anything else to do. Besides, I’ve gotten used to looking after your ass all this time. Might as well keep it up,” she joked, bumping shoulders with Satsuki.

A small smile graced Satsuki’s lips. She could feel the medication taking effect then, calming her immensely. “Alright, let’s go find a place to live,” she exclaimed as she stood, walking calmly into the manor with Ryuko in pursuit.

Chapter 25

Three months had passed since Satsuki had begun taking her medications, and Ryuko had noticed a great change in her. She wasn't sure if it was merely a result of moving into the ranch style home that they now shared or if the medication was really that effective, but frankly Ryuko wasn't complaining. This was the happiest that she had ever seen Satsuki, so she was infinitely grateful for all of the progress that had been made.

The two of them still attended therapy regularly, though less frequently than before. Although Satsuki still had the occasional anxiety attack, she had become skilled at recognizing the preceding symptoms and treating them with her medications, removing herself from the situation, and performing her breathing exercises. In her free time, Satsuki could be found hanging out with the elites or working away at the local recreation center, honing her sword fighting technique. She found that this particular hobby was a useful distraction; it helped her expend extra tension and energy while simultaneously putting her mind at ease by focusing on her movements instead of her thoughts. Satsuki felt calmest in these moments, the hilt of the wooden blade a familiar sensation in her hand, giving her a sense of security that even the medications could not replicate. Although she still had days where her emotions would get the best of her, her slumps never lasted for more than a few days at most.

This must be what normal feels like, she found herself thinking one night as she and Ryuko watched a movie. Ryuko's head was in Satsuki's lap, and Satsuki found herself absentmindedly running her fingers through her sister's hair. *Life is finally good*. She looked down at Ryuko as she felt something wet on her thigh and found Ryuko dozing, drool dripping from her open mouth onto Satsuki's lap.

Rolling her eyes, Satsuki muttered, "How can one person drool so much?" under her breath. Effortlessly, she scooped Ryuko's limp, snoring body into her arms and carried her to the bedroom they shared. "Disgraceful," she groaned as Ryuko's head lolled around uselessly. Despite her disgust, she laid Ryuko gently on the mattress before heading to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Since they had started sleeping in the same bed, Satsuki had not awoken once from her nightmares, though sometimes in the early morning hours, when she was dozing more than sleeping, she occasionally found herself hanging from her wrists or held down in the bathhouse. Fortunately, these dreams seemed to only last for a few minutes before red fibers would inevitably make an appearance, chasing her demons away. Satsuki rinsed her mouth out before padding back into the bedroom and clambering into the bed. She covered herself and Ryuko's still unconscious form with the blanket before pulling Ryuko into her arms, choosing to be the big spoon to avoid a wet spot of drool in her now shoulder-length hair (something she'd learned to avoid the hard way). The scent of Ryuko's strawberry shampoo soothed Satsuki into a deep sleep.

It was a Wednesday, meaning that it was Satsuki's turn to have her friends come to her place. Each of the elites had a different day designated for hosting a get together, a routine in which Satsuki found solace. Ryuko had ducked out earlier that morning, having made plans to meet up with Mako as she was wont to do every Wednesday, claiming that it was "better than having to sit around listening to the troll's annoying voice all day."

A knock on the door signaled the arrival of at least one member of her group of friends, but she was surprised to find all four of her former subjects at the door greeting her eagerly. She accepted their greetings as they filed in, tensing only slightly at their forms of physical affection. She had become

almost completely used to Ryuko's touch, but for some reason she still found physical contact with others to be a not entirely comfortable experience. She led them to the cozy living room, where they sat down on the various pieces of furniture; Satsuki in her armchair, Houka, Uzu, and Nonon on the couch, and Gamagoori in a second armchair. A plain wooden coffee table, laden with tea and cookies, separated them. After some idle chit chat, Gamagoori cleared his throat.

"Satsuki-sama, in order to celebrate the great strides at recovery you have made, the four of us would like to treat you to a formal dinner, if you're willing to accept."

Surprised, Satsuki leaned back in her chair. "You don't have to do that for me," she remarked, suddenly feeling shy.

"We know that, but we still want to. It's at the best restaurant around. I researched it and it sounds exquisite," Houka interjected.

"Plus we already made the reservation, so you kinda have to come with us," Uzu smiled smugly.

"If you insist," Satsuki conceded, a small, appreciative smile gracing her features.

"Perfect! The reservation is for tomorrow night. We made the reservation for eight people just in case you wanna bring Matoi and the underachiever or whoever else," Nonon explained, waving her hand in mock disgust at the mention of Ryuko and Mako, "but they have to be dressed nice, because this place is probably more prestigious than the dumps they normally eat at."

Satsuki chuckled. "I will let them know about it."

"We will be here tomorrow at 6PM to pick you and the others up. The reservation is for 7PM, so that should give us enough time to drive there and take into account any...mishaps that may put us behind," Gamagoori stated.

Satsuki could tell he was trying very hard not to outright tell her that she and the others would need to be punctual. *Ever the rule enforcer*, she mused. "Do not fret. I will make sure that we are all on time," she offered, watching as Gamagoori relaxed at her words. The rest of their time together was spent perusing the menu from Houka's PDA, excitedly discussing the food and what they wanted to order.

It was 5:55PM and Satsuki knew she was going to be in big trouble. Not only had Ryuko not gotten out of the shower yet, but Mako had still not arrived.

Gamagoori and the others will be here in 5 minutes and he is going to kill me when he sees I can't even control these two. Just as she was about to forcibly break down the door to the bathroom, Ryuko emerged wrapped in a towel and humming an upbeat tune.

"Ryuko, honestly what the fuck? I told you to be ready by 6! That's only two minutes from now!"

"Don't worry, Sats, jeez. All I gotta do is get dressed, which takes like 15 seconds. Relax," she grumbled, resuming her humming.

A knock on the door startled Satsuki, causing her to jump up. *I hope that's Mako. Please be Mako.*

Wrenching the door open, she was surprised to find Mako flanked by the elites. She realized she must have been giving them a strange look when Gamagoori explained, "We saw her walking on the way here so we decided to give her a lift. Are you ready to leave?"

Satsuki wasn't sure if it was the stress of trying to keep her sister in line or the fear of disappointing her friends by making them late that caused her to blanch at the question. She opened her mouth to come up with an excuse for her sister's tardiness when a voice behind her happily exclaimed, "Yeah, we're ready. Let's go fucking eat!" She turned to find Ryuko walking towards the door, fully dried and dressed.

Damn, that really was fast, she thought, sighing imperceptibly in relief as they all piled into Gamagoori's SUV. The ride was filled with banter (amiable for the most part) between the occupants and the occasional song from Mako, and Satsuki found that she was looking forward to the meal. At quarter to 7 they pulled into the expansive driveway in front of the restaurant's double doors and were greeted by the valet, who helped them each out of the car before parking it out of sight. They were greeted with a sweeping bow by the doorman, who then escorted them to the hostess desk.

"Reservation for Gamagoori," he rumbled humbly.

The hostess, a young girl half of Gamagoori's height, winced at his deep voice but covered it with a cough. She checked her list before grabbing multiple menus and replying, "Follow me please." They followed her through the restaurant, zig-zagging around tables and waiters alike, until they reached a private room near the back. The room was lit with an intricate chandelier above the large round table, which was covered in a white table cloth and a beautiful floral centerpiece. Seven chairs surrounded the table, and as Satsuki sat in one of them, she realized it was only a step down from a real arm chair. She sank into the seat and watched as her friends' eyes rolled back in their heads as they sat on the comfortable furniture. The menus were quickly passed out before the centerpiece was removed from the table, allowing everyone to see the people across from them. Satsuki looked down at her place setting. Multiple plates, forks, and other utensils waited in front of her.

This must be a multiple course meal. And this room, it's so fancy. They did not have to do all of this for me, Satsuki found herself thinking as she teared up ever so slightly. A gentle hand appeared on her left knee, hidden by the table cloth, and rubbed gentle circles over her skin where the dress she was wearing did not cover. She turned her head curiously to the side to find Ryuko animatedly talking to Mako to her left.

How did she know, without even looking at me, that I needed this? she pondered, grateful for the unspoken support.

A man in a black suit and slicked back hair appeared. "Good evening. My name is Rosario. I will be your waiter tonight. If you need anything at all please let me know. For now, can I take your drink orders?" As he made his way around the table, writing down the orders as he circled, Satsuki glanced at the menu and decided to splurge and order Coke. Although she normally preferred water or tea, she figured this was a special occasion. After assuring them that he would return shortly, Rosario departed with a flourish. Before they could even begin a conversation, two baskets of warm bread were brought in and placed on the table, filling the room with the smell of something heavenly.

"Fuck," Ryuko groaned, mouth watering as she swiped a roll from the basket and began buttering it. The others followed suit, snacking on the bread as they discussed the menu options and what they thought sounded best. As Ryuko grabbed the last roll from the basket, Rosario entered, balancing their drinks on a tray. He deftly passed them out, careful not to spill even a drop, before reaching into his back pocket for his notebook. "Are we ready to order?"

"Yes!" the seven of them replied in unison, a hunger in their eyes (and stomachs). After making his

way around the table once more, he paused and stated, “As you may have noticed, this is a multiple course meal. Your soup will be out in a few minutes, followed by a salad, a small pasta dish, and then your main entrees. If your stomachs can handle it, we do also serve dessert,” he ended with a twinkle in his eyes before disappearing once more.

“Holy shit, you guys. This is, like, the fanciest fucking place I’ve ever eaten!” Ryuko screeched excitedly.

“Watch your fucking mouth, idiot! Your vocabulary is too vile to even be exposed to this restaurant,” Nonon spat back.

“You’re the idiot! And how about you watch your own mouth, shithead!”

In the background, Uzu began singing “Why can’t we be friends” repeatedly until both girls turned to him and snapped, “Shut the fuck up!” Ryuko and Nonon then turned to each other, glaring, until they both burst into laughter and high-fived each other behind Satsuki’s back. Satsuki rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide the look of amusement on her face. While Mako talked Gamagoori’s ear off and Uzu and Houka admired something on the latter’s handheld device, Ryuko and Nonon planned ways to aggravate Uzu. Satsuki sat back contentedly and listened to Ryuko and Nonon’s antics, supplying a suggestion every once in a while.

When the steaming hot soup was placed in front of them, all conversation stopped as each person savored the taste of the chicken tortellini soup. The only sounds were the clinks of spoons against porcelain and the occasional slurp. Once Satsuki, the slowest eater, had finished her soup, Rosario appeared as if on cue with a tray full of salads. They dug in once again.

“Fucking christ, the food here is incredible,” Ryuko spoke between bites of the leafy mixture. The others hummed in agreement, devouring their food in record time.

“I hope I have room for the main meal,” Satsuki murmured, and the others couldn’t help but concur.

Rosario popped in once more, clearing their plates and announcing, “Your food should be up in about 10 minutes. Could I interest you in some champagne? I heard this was a celebration of sorts.”

The warmth in the room seemed to be sucked out instantly as an air of awkwardness replaced it. Eyes darted back and forth, not sure whom to look at, before Satsuki spoke up.

“Bring out a bottle.”

Ryuko leaned forward to protest until Satsuki continued, “I’m sure my friends would love to have some. Just, please only bring 6 glasses,” she finished, trying to suppress the shame she could feel creeping up in the back of her mind. As the waiter left, Gamagoori looked close to tears.

“My lady, please forgive me. I should have had enough foresight to anticipate telling them not to offer alcoholic beverages,” he choked out.

She smiled as convincingly as possible as she waved her hand dismissively. “No need to worry. I am not some fragile being, and that vice is one that I have hopefully put away forever. Do not feel the need to walk on eggshells around me.”

Nevertheless, he bowed so low and so forcefully that his head nearly cracked his dinner plate in half.

“Jeez, toad, relax. She said it’s cool,” Uzu remarked, tension melting from his body at Satsuki’s

reaction.

Rosario returned with seven champagne glasses, one containing a cherry pierced by a little plastic sword. He passed the bubbling drinks around, handing Satsuki the flute containing the cherry. He leaned in close so only she could hear and murmured, "White grape juice. Didn't want you to be left out," he explained, offering her a warm smile as he straightened up.

"Thank you," she replied, suddenly feeling very emotional. She swallowed the lump in her throat as the others raised their glasses.

Gamagoori began. "To the greatest leader--"

"And friend!" Nonon interjected.

"That we have ever had the pleasure of meeting," Houka continued.

"We wouldn't trade you for the world," Uzu finished, a genuine smile plastered over his face.

"And to the greatest fucking sister on this damn planet!" Ryuko shouted.

"Cheers!" Mako squealed, causing a chorus of "cheers" to ring out over the sound of glasses clinking together. They all drank the bubbling liquid happily. Satsuki sipped her grape juice and struggled not to cry.

These past few months have been really shitty but these people never gave up on me, not even for a second. I'm so lucky to have them in my life. Despite the cheerful conversation happening around the table, Satsuki found her lower lip quivering.

"Yo, I gotta piss before the real food gets here. Sats, come with me." Ryuko grabbed Satsuki's hand, brooking no room for argument, and pulled her up and out of the room.

"Wanna go outside for a sec?" she inquired once out of the room and out of earshot from the others. Satsuki nodded, cheeks ablaze with heat from trying to suppress her emotions. They wove their way through the maze of tables towards the front and stepped outside, a cool breeze offering her instant relief.

"You alright?" Ryuko questioned as she leaned against the brick wall behind her.

Satsuki put her hands on her hips and looked upwards, bidding the tears to recede before they could fall. She let out a shaky breath and then a puff of humorless laughter. "I was just thinking how I don't deserve to have such great people in my life," she admitted, trying to keep her voice from quavering. "You all have stuck with me through the worst and never faltered or stopped believing in me. I just..." she rubbed her eyes and sighed, "Sometimes it is hard to believe that you all still put up with me, I guess."

Ryuko sighed and grabbed Satsuki's hand, pulling her closer and, with a speed that only Satsuki could ever match, lunged forward and gave a swift but gentle slap to the back of Satsuki's head. "You're a real dumbass sometimes, ya know that?" Ryuko murmured, enveloping Satsuki in a hug. She melted into the embrace, sniffing as she did so.

Ryuko pulled away and placed her hands on the side of Satsuki's face, pulling her head down so that she could touch their foreheads together. "Stop worrying so much. We all love you and we're never gonna abandon you or get tired of you. You'd do the same for any of us. I promise you that we will always love and support you, alright?" Ryuko murmured, staring intently into Satsuki's eyes. An intense heat blossomed in Satsuki's chest, momentarily making it hard to breathe. She

nodded and Ryuko released her head.

“You good now?” she asked.

Satsuki nodded again.

“Good, ‘cause I’m fucking starving. Let’s tear this food up,” she grinned, leading Satsuki back to the table.

The rest of the evening went off without a hitch once they returned. Satsuki engaged happily in conversation with the others as they savored the pasta and their delectable entrees, occasionally passing forkfuls of food to others so they could try each others’ meals. They even opted for dessert, and Rosario procured a tray full of ice cream, cheesecake, and pastries to be shared among them.

“I’m gonna fucking explode if I eat one more thing,” Ryuko groaned as she stuffed another bite of cannoli into her mouth.

Mako leaned back in her chair, rubbing her bulging stomach and moaning. Uzu had slipped into a food coma, head hanging off the back of his chair as he slumped down in his seat.

Rosario appeared with the check, which Gamagoori intercepted before Satsuki could even attempt to pay the bill. Massive wealth or not, he’d be damned if the four of them didn’t properly pay her back for everything she’d done for them over the years. Satsuki opened her mouth to argue but Houka cut her off almost immediately.

“You’ve done so much for us. Please allow us the honor of repaying the favor.”

Gamagoori slipped his credit card into the check holder and handed it swiftly to Rosario. Satsuki sat back, grumbling albeit good-naturedly. Rosario returned, handing back the credit card, and once the receipt was signed they piled back into the SUV and returned to Ryuko and Satsuki’s home, relishing each others’ company and watching the boys play video games.

Satsuki found herself wishing that this happiness would last forever.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

So. I just found out a friend of mine has pretty bad depression, maybe worse than mine, and that they self-harm. I am not allowed to tell anyone, so I guess I will have to funnel my anxiety about the situation into this chapter. That being said, this chapter contains self-harm behaviors and should be read at your own discretion.

Satsuki knew as soon as she opened her eyes that morning that she was about to be heading into a rough patch. She felt as though all of her energy had been sapped from her body, making it impossible to get out of bed. She lay there, staring blankly at the ceiling, trying to fend off the emotional numbness that had saturated her body, settling in her bones and expanding, pushing out her normal emotions. A lifeless sigh escaped from her mouth.

Not again, she thought. She was no stranger to the feelings that came along with her depression, so she could tell that this was just day one of what would inevitably turn into a three-day stint of those feelings resurfacing. She shrugged mentally, too fatigued to do so physically. *Whatever. Let's get this over with so I can go back to normal.*

As she reflected, she realized it had been about a month since her last “episode” as she called them. *That was probably the longest I've gone between episodes. Hopefully they just keep getting further and further apart until they stop altogether.*

Dragging herself out of bed carefully to avoid waking Ryuko, she pulled on her favorite robe and shuffled towards the kitchen. Her appetite was never very strong during her slumps; she often opted to drink her favorite tea in lieu of food. While waiting for the kettle to signal its job was done, she pulled a bottle of pills from the cupboard and tipped it into her palm, allowing a capsule to fall into her hand. She rolled it absently between her fingertips as she waited. When the kettle boiled, she mechanically removed it from the stove and began preparing her tea before trudging to the living room and plopping into her armchair. Again, she found herself sighing.

Help me out, she willed the pill as she placed it in her mouth and washed it down with tea. She knew, of course, that the antidepressants did not work that way, but that didn't stop her from holding onto some vain hope that the capsule would magically snap her out of her depressed state. Obviously, it did not have the desired effect, and Satsuki found herself somewhat disappointed.

Today is Wednesday, isn't it? I need to tell the others I'm cancelling today's get together. She picked up her cell phone from the coffee table where she'd abandoned it the night before and started a group message to the elites.

>Sorry to say but I am not feeling well today so I will be cancelling our normally scheduled activities. It is very likely that I will not be joining you for the next few days. I will text you when I am feeling better.

She pressed the ‘Send’ button before tossing the phone back onto the table. The elites were familiar with the implications of the messages they received from Satsuki every once in a while telling them she could not hang out with them. As Ryuko had explained to them after the third episode, Satsuki was simply too exhausted, mentally and physically, to go through the motions that

came with social interaction. Ryuko had clarified that it usually lasted only a few days before the fog eventually dissipated, leaving Satsuki back to normal. Sure enough, Satsuki would alert the others a few days after the original text that she was feeling much better and was itching to hang out with them once again.

In the beginning, they would occasionally attempt to text or call her during her rough spells but she was usually too apathetic to even read the messages, let alone respond. Eventually they came to realize that she would come around after a short period of time, stating that she was better and ready to socialize once more, so they had learned to expect her intermittent antisocial behavior. The customary “See you soon” and “Feel better” texts poured in from the elites, her phone chirping with each message until she had counted four and it descended into silence once more. Satsuki slumped back into her chair and closed her eyes.

It had been a week since the beginning of her depressive episode and the melancholy that surrounded her showed no signs of disappearing. Ryuko noticed that Satsuki was harder to convince to eat than normal, often claiming that she was not hungry despite never eating more than a few small snacks during the day. Satsuki had also begun sleeping much more than usual; she could frequently be found napping in her chair, despite sleeping for over 12 hours each night. Ryuko was beginning to worry that Satsuki would slip back into the routine she’d been stuck in before being put on antidepressants. The lack of energy had caused Satsuki to stop leaving the house, interrupting her workout routine at the rec center.

Frustrated with the length of this depressive stint, Ryuko found herself going stir crazy. Satsuki was never good company when depressed; she had difficulty focusing on her surroundings, making it difficult for her to hold a conversation or engage in whatever activity Ryuko would inevitably force her into. Even when she attempted to read, she would inexorably end up staring blankly at the book, not turning the pages for the entirety that it sat on her lap. Besides this, Ryuko was now fielding texts from the elites, who were concerned that Satsuki was still not answering their messages.

>She’s fucking fine! Stop texting me!

Ryuko sent out as a group text after receiving yet another text from Gamagoori. Their worry began to rub off on Ryuko, who found herself wondering just when exactly Satsuki would snap out of it.

Come on, nee-san. Why aren’t you getting better?

Three weeks after the start of Satsuki’s symptoms, the pair found themselves seated in Dr. Mahmoud’s office for their regularly scheduled therapy session. Ryuko had basically had to drag a listless Satsuki to the office and now found herself doing most of the talking while Satsuki sat silently in her usual spot on the sofa.

“She’s been this way for, like, three weeks now. Usually she snaps right out of it after a couple of days but she hasn’t even shown one sign of coming out of this one,” Ryuko explained, grumbling as she ran her fingers through her hair, swiping the red streak away from her eye.

“Did something happen to bring this on?” the doctor inquired, addressing both girls.

Satsuki did not even seem to hear the question, and after a few seconds of silence Ryuko rolled her eyes and gestured towards Satsuki.

“See what I mean? It’s like she’s not even there!”

The doctor hummed. “Is she still taking the antidepressant every day?”

Ryuko nodded, a flash of fear passing through her eyes before she could contain it.

The doctor noticed immediately. “I take it you are worried for your sister.”

“Just fucking fix her, please,” Ryuko pleaded.

“Well, it’s possible that she has gained a tolerance to the medication. It may be time to up her dose. Take two pills instead of one from now on. If this doesn’t help, we may have to add a second medication to her regimen to increase the effectiveness. In the mean time, you may just have to wait it out. For the next few weeks, I’d like to have a weekly session so we can review her progress more frequently on her new medication dosage.”

Ryuko assented, waving her hand dismissively. “Yeah, whatever you think is best.” They left the session, Satsuki acting as disinterested as ever.

That night, Satsuki found herself unable to sleep, despite Ryuko clinging onto her like any other night.

I don’t want to feel numb anymore, she decided after tossing and turning for an hour.

She slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light to prevent Ryuko from waking up. She rifled through the bathroom drawers before pulling out an opened pack of shaving razors. She pulled a razor from the pack and pried one of the sharp pieces of metal from the plastic head, placing it carefully on the counter before replacing the cartridge back in its pack.

Satisfied, she sat on the counter and took the tiny blade between her fingertips, considering it carefully. The air in the bathroom seemed to take on a chill, covering her skin in goosebumps. As she stared at her exposed forearms, she wondered, *Am I really going to do this?* With a surprisingly steady hand, she brought the razor down and pressed it gently against her left wrist, under a nearly completely faded scar from her days hanging in the cage. The glint of the blade contrasted sharply against her pale skin, startling her into lucidity for a moment.

What the hell am I doing?

Despite this, her hand did not waver; the blade remained pressed against her wrist along a crease in the skin. She wasn’t sure how long she sat there frozen, breathing heavily as she considered her next move. The world fell away, reduced to the gentle pressure of the cold blade pressed against her skin.

Just do it, before you forget what it feels like to feel anything, her mind urged her, suddenly too eager about what was about to happen. As the blade dragged sideways across her skin, leaving a dark red line of blood in its wake, she felt a sudden feeling of calm overtake her. The pain at the site of her injury seemed to have awoken *something* inside of her, the first thing that had broken through the numbness since it had begun three weeks prior.

The sensation of pain had her reminiscing about the times she’d battled with Ryuko, adrenaline pumping through her veins, a true excitement permeating her body, one that she had not felt until Ryuko had swaggered into Honnouji Academy wielding the scissor blade and presenting herself as

an actual challenge against Satsuki. In a detached sort of way, Satsuki watched as blood seeped from the wound, staining her skin before it clotted, turning a darker shade of crimson.

A sort of fascination filled her and she found her hand bringing the blade to her wrist again, right below the original wound. Before she could cut herself again, a hand had wrapped itself around the wrist that currently held the blade, making it impossible for her move her arm. A feral desire seemed to erupt inside of her as she jerked her unrestrained arm up against the razor held immobile in her other hand. Immediately, another hand grabbed her now bleeding arm and held it away from her body.

She relished the pain shooting up her arm, both from the cut and the strength of the grip of the hands restraining her. As her eyes regained focus, she found herself face to face with Ryuko, who had tears in her eyes. Ryuko appeared to be shouting, but Satsuki thought it sounded like she was very far away or perhaps underwater. Words began to filter into her ears slowly, sounding less and less muffled.

“What the fuck are you doing?! Are you trying to kill yourself right now?! Literally what the fuck! Goddamn it, Satsuki, you idiot! What the hell?” Ryuko was sobbing now, profanities falling from her mouth as freely as the tears cascading down her face. Not quite sure how to react in this situation, Satsuki merely froze, unable to escape Ryuko’s grip anyway. Blood dripped down her arm and to the floor below from the uneven mark she’d just inflicted, speckling the tile with the scarlet liquid.

Like a vice, the hold on her razor-wielding hand increased painfully, causing Satsuki’s hand to spring open instinctively, dropping the blade onto the floor. A small gasp of pain escaped Satsuki’s lips as Ryuko showed no sign of relinquishing her grip.

“You’re hurting me,” Satsuki whimpered quietly as her wrist popped under Ryuko’s grip, not unlike a knuckle being cracked, causing a jolt of electricity to shoot down her hand, which suddenly went numb .

“*I’m* hurting you?! What about what *you* just did to yourself?” Ryuko shouted, face reddening with emotion as her voice increased in volume. “How could you say that I’m hurting you?!”

Inherently, Satsuki knew that this was different. What she’d done to herself had been controllable and self-limiting, whereas the pain inflicted by Ryuko’s bone crushing grip was neither of these things. However, she did not think Ryuko would be open to hearing her reasoning. Her main priority was freeing her tingling hand from its prison before Ryuko snapped her wrist completely.

“Stop,” Satsuki commanded with as much authority as she could muster, given the circumstances. Ryuko did not answer, though her grip stopped tightening. They sat in a stalemate, staring each other down until Satsuki’s head began to sink downwards, eyes fluttering. She glanced at her injured arm and saw that Ryuko was holding it tightly enough that the ends of the cut were separated, impeding the still bleeding wound from closing. A large puddle of blood had formed below her on the bathroom floor. Her eyes flicked back to Ryuko’s fury filled orbs, pleading for her to stand down.

“Ryuko...” Satsuki trailed as her body slackened, eyes rolling back into her head and body leaning forward limply until her suddenly much too cumbersome head knocked against Ryuko’s shoulder. Startled, Ryuko snapped out of her rage.

“Fuck,” she murmured, loosening her grip on Satsuki’s arms so that she could place her on the bathroom floor, avoiding the blood puddle. She dug through the cabinet under the sink and pulled out a first aid kit, then yanked a few towels from the closet next to the door. She balled them up

and stuffed them under the unconscious Satsuki's feet, then used a wet rag to hold pressure against the jagged wound. After a few minutes she cleaned the gash, which had mostly stopped bleeding, and dressed both cuts with gauze and tape, cursing at the adhesive strips that seemed more insistent on sticking to herself than her sister.

Assessing her paler than normal sibling, Ryuko sat back on her knees and wiped her forehead with the back of her forearm, trying to recall the one time she had donated blood at the high school she'd attended before Honnouji. The situation as a whole had been unpleasant and had spurred her fear of needles, but she knew that occasionally, after the pint of blood was removed, some people could lose consciousness.

She's still breathing, but she probably needs to make up for lost blood volume and eat some snacks to keep her blood sugar up, she deduced, remembering the beloved snack table that had almost redeemed the blood donation experience.

Satsuki slowly opened her eyes, blinking confusedly. "What happened?"

"You passed out, you dumb fuck," Ryuko spit back with more venom than she'd intended. Hurt flashed through Satsuki's eyes and Ryuko mentally reprimanded herself. "Stay here," she spoke more softly before making her way to the kitchen.

Satsuki lay still on the cold tile of the bathroom, too tired to move. Her right hand was still numb from Ryuko's grip and her left arm felt sore, as if a bruise were forming where Ryuko's other hand had clutched it desperately.

This did not turn out how I expected, she mused, chuckling in her disorientation, *but I suppose it had the desired effect.* She recalled the emotions that seemed to have been activated by the razor. *A bad habit to take up...if I really want to feel pain I could just ask Ryuko to punch me, hah.*

Ryuko reappeared with a bottle of Gatorade, a glass of orange juice, and a sleeve of Oreos. She lifted Satsuki into a sitting position, leaning her against the cupboard behind her, before silently forcing her to drink the entire glass of juice. After shoving three cookies into Satsuki's mouth at once, Ryuko relaxed, positioning herself to sit next to Satsuki, tiredly resting against the wooden doors pressed against her back.

Struggling not to choke on the food forced into her mouth, Satsuki took her time chewing as Ryuko occasionally munched on a cookie. They sat in silence, punctuated by the sound of crunching cookies and Gatorade sloshing in the bottle as Satsuki drank from it. Ten minutes passed like this until Ryuko finally spoke up.

"How do you feel?"

Satsuki thought she detected the slightest hint of guilt seep into the question. "Well, I can't feel my right hand anymore, so there's that," she remarked casually, waving her tingling hand pathetically.

Ryuko groaned, leaning her head back sharply against the cupboard. "Sorry," she muttered. A few seconds passed before she bristled and revoked her original statement. "You know what, actually fuck that. I'm not sorry. You were doing something stupid and I reacted like I thought was appropriate." She huffed, crossing her arms over her chest indignantly.

Satsuki remained silent, opting instead to sort through what she'd just experienced. After a few minutes, Ryuko chimed in once again.

"Are you gonna say anything or what?"

Startled from her reverie, Satsuki jumped slightly before turning her head to face Ryuko and speaking in a level voice. “What do you want me to say? Do you want me to just apologize so we can pretend it never happened? Or should I promise that I’ll never do it again when I don’t know if I can guarantee that?”

Ryuko flinched before blurting out, “Were you trying to kill yourself?”

Satsuki sighed. “No. I just wanted to feel something. The past three weeks have been torture. I’ve felt as though all of my emotions were removed and it left me feeling completely empty. It’s strange,” she mused thoughtfully, “to not feel anything for so long. You begin to forget what it is to feel. I suppose I craved any sensation after going so long feeling numb.”

Ryuko pondered her words thoughtfully. “Well don’t do it again. If you wanna feel something, I can arrange a safer way,” she joked as she playfully cracked her knuckles. “But seriously, don’t do this anymore. Please,” she pleaded, eyes suddenly serious.

Satsuki merely shrugged and looked away. “If every instance happens like this,” she replied, nodding her head towards the slowly drying puddle of blood staining the floor, “I won’t be able to afford keeping it up,” she joked.

Rolling her eyes, Ryuko stood and grabbed a bottle of bleach from the closet, pouring copious amounts of the liquid onto the floor. The blood mixed with the yellowish liquid, swirls of red twisting and writhing in the powerful cleaner. Disappearing momentarily, Ryuko returned with a bucket and mop and cleaned the mess from the floor while Satsuki sat and watched.

“Fuck this,” Ryuko grumbled, tossing the wet mop into the shower. “I’ll deal with that later,” she mumbled as she poured out the bucket over the mop head, cleaning it just enough to meet her cleanliness standards.

“Let’s go to fucking bed,” she yawned. As Satsuki made to stand, Ryuko placed a hand on her shoulder. “No more passing out,” she stated before picking Satsuki up and carrying her bridal style to the bed. They settled in together, both falling asleep almost instantly.

Chapter 27

Satsuki woke the next morning with a pounding headache.

What the hell?

As she shifted in bed, she realized her head was not the only painful body part she had to deal with. Her right wrist was encircled by a dark bruise, a sort of morbid bracelet, and a faint tingling lingered in her fingertips. Her left arm was worse for wear. Peeking out from underneath the pink tinted bandages covering her forearm was another bruise that looked like an exact replica of Ryuko's hand. As she clenched her left fist experimentally, pain shot up her arm. The bruise was definitely sore, but a searing pain under the bandages grabbed her attention. She lifted her arm to her face as she laid on her back, too dizzy to sit up. Gently, Satsuki began prying the edges of the tape up, fingers moving carefully and gracefully despite the numbness. Once the tape was successfully removed, she peeled the gauze back until a burning pain erupted.

It seems the blood has dried and now the gauze is stuck to the wound. Lovely.

She sighed and let her arm fall limply onto the mattress, the bandage fluttering with the movement. She glanced at the bedside clock and found it to be half past 11. Staring at the sleeping form of her sister, Satsuki decided she'd probably stressed her out enough last night.

No need to wake her just yet. I can clean myself up without her help.

Rolling towards the end of the bed, she pushed herself up with her less injured arm and let her legs dangle over the edge. Stars erupted in her vision and she swayed, clutching onto the mattress for support in an attempt to not fall forwards. She gritted her teeth and breathed heavily, attempting to stave off unconsciousness. After a moment, it seemed the darkness filling her vision began to recede, leaving her finally able to see the wall across from her.

Alright. Slow and steady. I can do this.

She scooted forward until her feet touched the soft carpet beneath her then pushed off of the mattress into a standing position. She wobbled for a moment, arms spread out in front of her to maintain her balance, until she felt stable enough to begin making her way to the bathroom. Flicking the light on, Satsuki shuffled to the sink and turned the knob. Water began gushing out and she idly dipped her fingertips into the flow until she deemed it a comfortable temperature. Gingerly, she placed her bandaged arm under the water and let it saturate the bandage. She experimentally tugged on the soaked gauze and found that it was much easier and less painful to remove. The dressing made a squishing sound as Satsuki deposited it in the trashcan beside the sink.

As she was about to examine her wrist and forearm, she heard the bathroom door creak open ever so slightly. Ryuko was peering inside, watching her intently. They locked gazes for a few tense seconds until Satsuki ripped her eyes away, guilt creeping up in the back of her mind upon seeing the dark circles under Ryuko's sapphire eyes.

It's too early to deal with her, Satsuki decided, turning her attention back to her left arm. Just as she'd suspected, a palm sized bruise was spread over the back of her forearm. Four long bruises wrapped around to the inside of her forearm like shadowy vines attempting to join the solitary bruise that had formed where Ryuko's thumb had no doubt pressed into her skin. In the space between the edges of the fingertip bruises was a diagonal laceration, nowhere near as superficial or

smooth as the first cut she'd attempted over her wrist.

"This probably needed stitches," she mumbled under her breath as she traced a finger lightly over the not quite approximated edges of the cut, avoiding the blood that seemed to have clotted between the two wound ends.

Satsuki sensed more than saw the change in Ryuko's demeanor and knew she was about to be lectured about how she "would never have been able to convince you to go to the hospital" or "maybe you should have thought about that before you did something so stupid." Just as Ryuko opened her mouth to speak, Satsuki raised a hand to silence her.

"Do not chastise me. I am not accusing you of negligence or anything of the sort; I'm merely making an observation," she stated matter-of-factly.

Ryuko crossed her arms and huffed but said nothing, opting instead to observe as Satsuki squatted and rummaged through the cupboard under the sink for the first aid kit that Ryuko'd haphazardly tossed inside hours before. Remembering too late that she was still suffering from the effects of blood loss, Satsuki stood up faster than she'd intended. The room faded to darkness as her body began to crumple but a solid weight behind her held her in place, another pair of arms suddenly weaving under her own armpits, holding her upright.

The first aid kit clattered to the ground as Satsuki's grip slackened and her head dipped down to her chest. Her world was spinning and her breathing had become shallow, but she managed to hold on to consciousness. When she was able to return her breathing to normal and open her eyes, she found herself lying on the bathroom floor once again, not unlike the night before. This time, however, Ryuko was holding Satsuki's legs straight up into the air.

"You're lucky I googled this shit last night after you fell asleep," Ryuko grumbled unhappily, though the glint in her eyes betrayed the fact that she was trying to suppress her fear.

"Guess 'm lucky ta have ya," Satsuki slurred as the room slowly stopped rotating.

Ryuko flushed at the compliment as she gently lowered Satsuki's legs to the floor. "You need to drink a shit ton of water to make up for the lost blood if this is how you're reacting hours later," Ryuko commanded. "And no more bending over and shit. I might not always be here to catch you and the last thing we need is a hole in the wall from you hitting your head or something."

Satsuki chuckled at that. "Thanks, Dr. Matoi."

"And now you're laughing at something I said? You must be worse than I thought," Ryuko said half-jokingly. She pulled Satsuki up into a sitting position and pulled her arms over her own shoulders, settling Satsuki on her back so she could carry her piggyback style to the living room. Satsuki rested her chin on Ryuko's shoulder as she bounced with each step Ryuko took. Ryuko deposited Satsuki into her armchair before meandering into the kitchen.

As Satsuki waited patiently for Ryuko to return she stared idly at the ceiling. The sound of what was likely every Tupperware container they owned falling from the cupboard onto the kitchen floor rang out, followed by a loud shout of "Fucking christ!" Satsuki listened to the thunk of plastic on plastic as Ryuko cleaned her mess. A loud crack rang out through the kitchen, followed by Ryuko crying out with a shrill "Bitch!"

"Are you alright in there?"

"Yeah, I just hit my *fucking* head on this *god forsaken* cupboard door," Ryuko growled, a string of

mumbled curse words tacked on to the end of the statement, going unnoticed by Satsuki. When Ryuko finally returned to the living room, she was carrying a large glass of water and a box of Cheez-its. Satsuki raised an eyebrow at her choice of breakfast food but was surprised when the box was thrust into her lap.

“Drink all this and eat a bunch of these fuckers,” Ryuko commanded, gesturing to the red box. “I’m gonna cook breakfast, but the salt in this should raise your blood pressure enough to stop you from falling over all the time. And before you ask,” she turned on her foot quickly and moved towards the kitchen, “your tea is already brewing.”

Satsuki made an impressed face before gingerly opening the box of cheese flavored crackers and plunging her hand inside, withdrawing a handful. When Ryuko finally returned with two plates filled with eggs and bacon balanced carefully on one arm and a large glass of orange juice and a pill bottle in the other, Satsuki eagerly placed the snack on the ground and willingly accepted a plate from Ryuko.

“Drink all this juice, too.”

Satsuki rolled her eyes but did as instructed while idly wondering when Ryuko had picked up so much medical knowledge. She sampled the food on her plate, surprised to find that after nearly a month of no appetite, she was actually hungry for once. She ate slowly despite the inhuman speed that Ryuko was wolfing down her own breakfast.

“So, you know you’re supposed to take two pills now, right?” Ryuko asked between mouthfuls.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. That does sound familiar,” Satsuki replied, trying to remember yesterday’s events but finding that the days of her long-lasting depressive episode had blurred together into a hazy, indiscernible memory. Deciding to take Ryuko’s word for it, Satsuki popped two capsules into her mouth and washed it down with the juice.

“Also, just so you know I scheduled an appointment with your psychiatrist for this afternoon.”

Fuck, Satsuki groaned internally. How am I going to explain what happened last night? It was hard enough explaining it to Ryuko, and I’m sure she doesn’t accept my reasoning on the subject. Hopefully the doctor is more understanding than Ryuko. I mean, of course she will be. That’s her job right?

“Uh, Sats? Are you alright? You’ve been staring blankly at the wall for like five minutes.”

Snapping out of her internal monologue, Satsuki nodded. “I got caught up in my thoughts. Forgive me.”

“Yeah, whatever, it’s fine. Hurry up and eat so we can get ready.”

A few hours later, the pair found themselves situated in the all too familiar office. Satsuki had opted to wear a long sleeve shirt in an attempt to cover up what she’d done, despite the fact that she would inevitably be forced to explain the incident anyway.

She wasn’t wrong.

“So, Satsuki, Ryuko told me that this session was necessary because of some sort of emergency. Would you care to elaborate?”

Satsuki's eyes flicked briefly to Ryuko's before turning her attention to her sleeve. Not feeling particularly verbal today (or for the past three weeks, really), Satsuki merely lifted her sleeve up gently, revealing a new set of gauze held in place by medical tape.

"Ahh," remarked the doctor knowingly as she leaned forward slightly in her chair to get a better look. "What prompted this action?" Dr. Mahmoud inquired neutrally.

Listlessly, Satsuki let her arm fall back onto her lap. "I was just so tired of not feeling anything that I decided to take matters into my own hands," she divulged, staring blankly at the wall in front of her.

"And how do you feel now? Do you think it helped?"

Satsuki shrugged. Sure, she'd felt exhilarated last night, but the emptiness had returned unabated this morning, proving just how futile the whole experience had been. And yet, *and yet*, it had provided a momentary solace from the emotional stagnation that she had been stuck in for weeks.

Deciding to be honest, Satsuki answered, "Yes and no. It felt great after I did it but now I feel the same as before." She sighed and pulled her sleeve back down, fidgeting with the hem until it adequately hid the bandages.

"As you can imagine, this is a very concerning development. Self-harming can be just as addictive as alcohol or other drugs and, given your history of substance abuse, it is important that we identify more effective ways of coping with your feelings. Now, did you cut yourself solely because you were feeling numb, or were there other emotions, such as anger, attached to it?"

"Just feeling numb. Honestly, I feel as though I haven't even had any emotions for the past few weeks. I do not get angry much; only when Ryuko and I are arguing about something, but anger is an emotion that I have a lot of experience dealing with. No, the numbness was definitely the only reason," Satsuki explained in a monotone.

"Alright, so the emotional numbness is the cause of your self-harm behaviors. In that case, I'm going to teach you a few ways to counteract that numbness without going to such drastic measures." The doctor flipped her notebook over to a clean page and began writing as she listed off alternative methods.

"Some people find that holding ice in their hands or against the body part that they usually harm helps take the edge off. Another option is to wear a rubber band around your wrist and snap it against your skin until the urge has passed. You can also write on yourself in red in lieu of using a razor. A cold or hot shower or bath may also be effective if the water temperature is not dangerously high or low. One of my clients has reported that arm wrestling with her brother is not only a distraction from the urge but offers enough sensation to replace the self-harm. Others have reported that clapping their hands together or slapping a tabletop hard enough to cause pain are suitable substitutes."

She set her pen down in her lap and ripped the paper she'd been scribbling on out of her notebook. Folding it, she handed it to Satsuki. "Unfortunately, not every method will work for you, so it will be up to you to find a method that really helps. Hopefully this incident was a once time deal, but if not, you now have ways of coping with it. If you have any concerns or need someone to talk to, feel free to call me at my office. Or, I'm sure your sister would be willing to listen to your feelings if needed," she suggested, motioning to the sleeping form of Ryuko, who was sprawled out over the couch.

"Unfortunately, unless there is something specific you'd like to address right now, I'm going to

have to cut this session short. I had to squeeze you in between appointments and my next one starts in a few minutes. Is that alright with you?"

Opting not to be more of a burden than she felt she was, Satsuki nodded and prodded Ryuko awake.

"I'll see you next week at your regularly scheduled appointment. Don't forget you should be taking two capsules now at the same time every day." The doctor stood and walked the girls the short distance to the door. "You've been doing great; keep up the great work," she said, a genuine smile forming on her face.

Satsuki managed a small smile in return as they were ushered out of the office and couldn't help feeling truly appreciative of all the help her therapist had given her.

As the girls stepped into the elevator, Ryuko accosted the doctor standing in the back and convinced him to take a quick look at Satsuki's wound. He examined it for a moment, cringing imperceptibly under Ryuko's intense gaze while Satsuki awkwardly held her arm out, before straightening up and declaring, "It's not as deep as it seems; however, I would recommend liquid stitches at the least to lower the risk for infection and keep the wound ends together to minimize scarring, especially with the length of the cut."

Satisfied, Ryuko stepped sideways, giving the doctor access to the elevator door. He wasted no time leaving as soon as it reached the ground floor. Satsuki was eager to go home but found herself being dragged to the emergency department unwillingly.

"Ryuko, please. He just said it's not as bad as it looks. It doesn't even hurt. Let's just go home," she pleaded.

"Nah. He said you need stitches."

"No, he said he *recommended* stitches. There's a difference."

"Nice try." Ryuko deadpanned, dragging Satsuki to the check-in desk. Fortunately, it appeared that they were the only ones in need of medical care at that moment in time, so they were brought back to a room almost immediately.

Thirty minutes later, they walked out of the ER, Satsuki sporting a line of stitches down her forearm. Satsuki found herself in a foul mood thanks to Ryuko's insistence on getting the stitches. As they rode back to their home in the car Ryuko had bought a few months before, Satsuki found herself inspecting the scars she had on her right hand where the glass had pierced it many months ago. The scar along the back of her hand had faded to a thin line but the scars adorning her palm were still noticeable, if not for the large cross-shaped lines then for the tiny dots bordering them where the stitches had been. She clenched her fist unhappily, hoping in vain that, when she opened her hand, the marks would have disappeared. Finding this was not the case, she groaned quietly and let her head fall back against the car's headrest.

Now my forearm is going to look the same as my stupid hand. I'm covered in these scars and everybody can see just how weak I've been and still am. Why can't I just be normal?

She spent the rest of the car ride frowning, gaze averted out the window in a feeble attempt at preventing Ryuko from noticing her dour mood.

It didn't work.

As Ryuko pulled into the driveway and parked the car, she turned towards Satsuki with concern in her eyes.

“What’s up with you?”

Despite the innocent nature of the question, Satsuki decided to take offense to Ryuko’s choice of words.

“What’s up with me?! I *told* you I did not want to get stitches and you forced me to and now my arm is going to be just as disfigured as my hand,” she scowled, forcing her open palm into Ryuko’s face and nearly bashing Ryuko’s nose with the speed of the action. Ryuko barely flinched as she continued to hold Satsuki’s gaze before glancing briefly towards the hand hovering in her line of sight.

“What do you mean “disfigured?” It’s just a few scars. Everybody has ‘em!”

“Well not everyone has them because they did it to themselves!” Satsuki shouted back. “Everyone can see these scars and they will know how weak I am!”

Ryuko snatched Satsuki’s arm by the wrist, lowering it out of her face and into her lap. She turned her sister’s hand over so the scars faced upwards and began idly tracing her index finger over the lines.

“These are not a sign of weakness,” she said softly but with such conviction that Satsuki found herself faltering slightly. “These are a sign of all of the shit that you’ve faced, and you fuckin’ survived it all. It should be a reminder of how *strong* you are, not how weak you are.”

“B-but, they are so ugly,” Satsuki replied lamely, deflating slightly.

Ryuko’s head snapped up at that. “There is nothing about you that is ugly, so get that idea outta your head. Everything about you is beautiful,” she stressed, cheeks taking on a pink hue. “And when I see these scars, I don’t see weakness or ugliness or disfigurement or whatever. Look. They look like constellations and those constellations tell a story of how you overcame some really tough shit. It’s like a tattoo only more badass. You are a night sky covered in constellations and I think that’s cool as hell. So don’t think of these as a weakness, think of them as the legends that they represent,” she finished, releasing Satsuki’s hand.

Satsuki was impressed to say the least. “When did you get so eloquent?” she asked, trying to suppress the heat that had colored her cheeks at Ryuko’s monologue.

“I dunno. I’ve been watching a lot of sappy movies recently,” she admitted, rubbing the back of her neck nervously.

Satsuki found herself speechless as she pondered Ryuko’s words with a sense of admiration. Unable to think of an adequate verbal response, she reached out and pulled Ryuko into a hug.

“Thanks, imouto,” she murmured into Ryuko’s neck.

“No problem, nee-san,” Ryuko responded, sounding flustered.

As Ryuko began to pull away, Satsuki stopped her by placing her hands on either side of Ryuko’s face. They stared at each other for a few seconds until Satsuki leaned forward and kissed Ryuko’s forehead, lips lingering for a few seconds too long. When Satsuki finally pulled away, Ryuko’s face was beet red.

“Y-you big softie,” she stuttered, heat emanating off of her in waves.

Satsuki merely smiled before exiting the car, leaving Ryuko to her thoughts.

Chapter 28

A week had passed since Satsuki's uncharacteristic show of affection and Ryuko found that the feelings of attraction she'd been suppressing since she'd moved in with Satsuki after her hospitalization had become much harder to control. Ryuko found herself staring at Satsuki while her sister read on the couch or sipped on her tea or performed chores around their home. There was something about the way she moved, the way she held herself with such grace and poise, that had Ryuko feeling as though her sister were exuding a gravitational pull that was inevitably drawing her closer and closer. Fortunately for Ryuko, it seemed as though Satsuki had failed to notice the numerous long glances cast her way, likely because she was far too busy attempting to bring her life back to normal.

For the past week, Satsuki had been improving slowly but surely. She was clawing her way up from the abyss of her depressive episode and fighting tooth and nail against the impulses to self harm or drink (although she had not yet mentioned the renewed craving of alcohol to Ryuko or her therapist). As much as she wanted to give in, she did not want to disappoint Ryuko or Dr. Mahmoud by falling off the wagon once more and had subsequently been able to avoid slipping up. She could often be seen sporting a rubber band around her wrist and occasionally snapping it against her skin, leaving angry red welts in its wake. She had been diligently taking her increased dosage of medication for the past week, though not without some prodding from Ryuko, who had made it her responsibility to make sure her sister took her meds daily, no matter how apathetic Satsuki was feeling. Ryuko had noticed that Satsuki was slowly snapping out of her episode and couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief every time Satsuki showed signs of normalcy.

However, sleeping in the same bed was suddenly awkward for Ryuko, though she was able to act as though all was well long enough for Satsuki to fall asleep. Once her sister's breathing would even out, Ryuko would allow the bright red blush to creep over her cheeks as she watched Satsuki sleep. Oftentimes as she lay awake she found herself reflecting on the times when they were merely rivals, unconnected by the bond of sisterhood. Tonight was no exception. With a furrowed brow and a contemplative visage, she allowed herself to indulge in her thoughts, thoughts that had been plaguing her for far too long.

How do I really feel about Satsuki? Like, there's no doubt that I think she is attractive as hell... wait, I mean WAS attractive as hell...okay wait, she is still hot but, like, that's normal to think, right? Girls give other girls compliments all the time and it's no big deal. This is the same thing pretty much. But if that's true, why do I feel so differently towards her suddenly? Or was this even a sudden thing? Even when I first arrived at Honnouji there was something about her that was so... alluring. Actually, maybe I just wanted to hate fuck her brains out for being such a pretentious bitch. Still, I definitely care about her a lot. Damn, why'd she have to kiss my forehead like that the other day anyway?! Making me have to deal with all these stupid thoughts about my stupid sister.

Ryuko scowled, shifting slightly under the covers. She waited with baited breath as Satsuki murmured something nonsensical in her sleep before she rolled over, facing Ryuko and automatically fisting her hand around the front of Ryuko's shirt. Satsuki's breaths came out in tiny puffs and Ryuko's face softened as she observed the older girl's slumber.

Damn, she's cute, Ryuko thought as sleep finally began to overtake her.

Still, the nagging sensation at the back of Ryuko's head was becoming more insistent, so much so that on the twelfth day after the "incident" (as Ryuko had begun mentally calling the forehead

kiss), as they sat on the couch in the living room together, she couldn't help pausing her video game and blurting out, "Have you ever had a boyfriend...or girlfriend?"

Taken aback, Satsuki lowered her novel and looked at Ryuko quizzically. "Why do you ask?" she inquired curiously.

Ryuko shrugged and began picking at a loose thread on the couch cushion between them. "I dunno, I was just wondering I guess," she responded lamely, trying to suppress the heat that was trying to stain her cheeks pink.

Satsuki watched Ryuko for a few seconds before answering, "I never had time to date while I was growing up. Planning a revolution and saving the world were too important to me and, as such, I was devoted to that task. I suppose you could say I was in a relationship with my work, if anything. But no, I never had romantic interest in anyone in the past."

Ryuko grunted then stuttered out, "W-would you ever, uh, consider dating anyone now?"

She looked up in time to see a look of hesitation cross over Satsuki's face.

"I...I don't know. I haven't really put much thought into it, to be honest. At this point I am just trying to survive. I am taking things day-by-day for now." Her brows furrowed as she fell into thought, filling the room with silence.

Ryuko felt like she would suffocate if the silence became any more oppressive and she opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Satsuki's quiet voice.

"I don't think I could ever open myself up to anyone like that," she admitted, eyes downcast. "I haven't even told my closest friends about my past, so how would I go about sharing it with someone else? Not to mention that I'm still not comfortable with physical contact from others. I imagine intimacy would be something that I would have difficulties with as well."

Ryuko felt her heart sinking until Satsuki continued, "Honestly, you are the only person I trust completely and the only one by whom I am comfortable being touched. Even that took a while to come to fruition. So I guess what I'm saying is that at this point I don't see myself being able to meet someone and trust them as completely as I trust you."

Ryuko's heart was beating a mile a minute.

She trusts me and I'm the only one who she feels comfortable with touching her. What does that mean?

Deciding to press her luck, Ryuko probed further. "Well, if you ever did get closer with, say, one of the elites, would you ever wanna be in a relationship with them?"

Satsuki pursed her lips, taking a minute before responding. "Probably not. I have a feeling that they still see me as their leader before their friend, which I think would be a pretty awkward relationship dynamic. I couldn't have them placing me on a pedestal for the rest of my life."

"Well, what about Nonon? You've known her for like, forever so wouldn't that be different?"

Satsuki snorted. "If anything, she idolizes me the most out of the four."

Ryuko hummed noncommittally, tearing her gaze away from Satsuki's face and staring instead at the game controller gripped in her hands.

“Why the sudden interest in my love life?” Satsuki asked, still baffled as to how random the question had been.

“No reason,” Ryuko chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of her neck.

Satsuki shrugged before returning to her novel, so Ryuko unpaused her game and began playing once more. A few minutes after Ryuko had become totally engrossed in the game, Satsuki cleared her throat. Ryuko’s eyes flitted to her sister before returning to the screen. She grunted, her way of asking Satsuki what she wanted.

“Have you ever had a significant other?”

Ryuko barked out a laugh. “Everyone was afraid of me growing up since I tended to beat the shit outta anyone who even looked at me wrong. I spent most of my childhood friendless and alone,” she answered casually, still absorbed in the game.

Satsuki felt her stomach sinking. *If only things had been different. If only I could have been there for her growing up.*

“It’s fine though, because then I had Mako and Senketsu, and even your friends are starting to grow on me a little. But don’t tell them I said that,” she warned mock-threateningly.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” Satsuki replied, smiling slightly.

“Plus I have you,” Ryuko continued, voice suddenly serious though her gaze remained glued to the TV. “You are the most important person to me and don’t think I could ever stand to lose you.”

Surprised, Satsuki felt her ears redden. “Same to you,” she murmured, placing her hand appreciatively on Ryuko’s knee. Ryuko jumped slightly, face turning a shade darker. They remained that way for a while, Satsuki occasionally brushing her thumb over the denim covering Ryuko’s knee while Ryuko button smashed furiously in an attempt to distract herself from her sister’s touch. When they retired for the evening, settling into bed together, Ryuko’s heart was pounding faster than normal. Every touch from Satsuki, no matter how benign, seemed to burn her skin and ignite a fire in her stomach.

God damn it, I fucked up, didn’t I? Ryuko internally chastised as she lay on her side, arm draped over Satsuki’s stomach as her sister’s back was pressed flush against her front side. Ryuko had recently taken to being the big spoon in order to hide her frequent blushing from Satsuki, and tonight was no exception. As Satsuki’s breaths evened out, Ryuko inhaled the scent of her sister’s shampoo, reveling in the comfort this simple action brought. Unfortunately for Ryuko, the first hour of lying in bed was spent thinking about the conversation about dating they’d had earlier.

I wonder if she likes dudes or girls? She didn’t really say what she liked...or if she likes anything at all. Though when I asked about dating Nonon she didn’t shoot down the idea by saying she’s not interested in girls. Maybe I would have a chance with her then! Wait, this is your sister we are talking about. SISTER. As in, blood related. Aren’t there laws against that? I don’t fucking know, I’m not a lawyer. But I bet Satsuki wouldn’t be into the whole incest thing after everything that went down with Ragyo. But I also wouldn’t know unless I asked her. Yeah, because casually asking about her views on incest is so fucking normal.

Ryuko bit her lip in frustration, bidding the disturbing thoughts from her mind before gently releasing Satsuki and rolling out of bed. She meandered to the bathroom, scratching her butt as she made her way to the counter. She ran the water as cold as it would go before cupping her hands and collecting the crisp water. Bringing her hands upward, she splashed the water against her face,

gasping gently at the sensation.

What am I gonna do with you? Ryuko asked herself unhappily as she splashed her face once more. Too lazy to pull a cup from the cupboard, Ryuko stuck her mouth under the faucet and drank from the stream of water greedily, begging it to extinguish the heat Satsuki's touch had evoked. Hastily, she dried her face and stared at her reflection as she made various faces in the mirror. She growled gently as she bared her canines, then scrunched her nose and made a snorting sound. Chuckling, she began checking herself out, flexing and striking various poses that exhibited her well-toned muscles. Ryuko's ears perked up as she thought she heard a small squeak coming from the bedroom. She paused, listening carefully, but hearing no other noises she resumed the show she was putting on for herself.

"Welcome...to the gun show!" she whispered excitedly, flexing both arms and kissing her biceps as she quietly cheered, supplying sound from a nonexistent audience. She winked at herself as she pointed at her reflection and made a clicking sound. Growing bored of her late night shenanigans, Ryuko yawned and stretched, groaning as quietly as she could.

Turning the bathroom light off, she shuffled back to the bed and cautiously laid on her side of the mattress, careful not to rock the bed for fear of waking Satsuki. However, as she turned to scoot closer to Satsuki, she noticed something was wrong. Her sister had curled in on herself as much as possible and was shaking ever so slightly. Her muscles were rigid and her breathing was somewhat labored. Figuring Satsuki was having a nightmare, Ryuko placed her open hand against Satsuki's back and held it there, waiting for the nightmare to abate. After a few minutes, the tension seemed to melt from her sister's body as her breathing returned to normal.

Satisfied, Ryuko scooted closer, aligning her sister's back with her own front. With their close contact, Ryuko could feel Satsuki's pulse slowing until it returned to the rhythm Ryuko knew so well from lying awake while holding a slumbering Satsuki for so many months. As Ryuko's eyes began to droop, Satsuki sighed ever so slightly before mumbling in her sleep.

Not this bullshit again, Ryuko griped internally, though she'd never admit that Satsuki talking in her sleep was actually pretty adorable. Normally her nighttime monologues consisted of garbled words or one-sided conversations with unseen entities, so Ryuko tended to ignore her ramblings. However, as a breathy "Ryuko" left Satsuki's mouth, Ryuko found her eyes snapping open as she held her breath, waiting. Seconds ticked by.

"Where did you leave the duck sauce?"

Ryuko deflated, disappointed in the lack of meaningful dialogue from the unconscious being in her arms, but simultaneously had to struggle to hold in her laughter at the randomness of the question.

"I think you left it at the Eiffel Tower," Satsuki continued, slurring her words ever so slightly. Snickering, Ryuko closed her eyes once more and listened for anything important.

"The show is tomorrow night. Don't forget."

Shut the fuck up, I just wanna go to bed for once, Ryuko complained internally. As sleep began to grip at her consciousness, she began to drift until Satsuki's next statement punctuated the air.

"I want to drink again."

Ryuko felt her blood go cold as despair gripped her chest.

It's just a dream. It could mean anything. She could be talking about water for all I know. Ryuko

tried to control her breathing. *Should I try to talk to her?* Figuring she had nothing to lose, she decided to investigate.

“Drink what?” she whispered, hoping Satsuki would not wake up.

Silence filled the air for a full minute until Satsuki murmured, “You know what.”

“No, I don’t. Please tell me,” she whispered back urgently.

“Don’t be silly, imouto,” she sighed. “Alcohol.”

Ryuko felt dread seeping into her stomach, making her nauseous. “Are you gonna?” she asked, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

“I dunno. Don’ wanna make you cry again. I’m tryin’ not to,” came Satsuki’s slurred response.

Ryuko swallowed the lump in her throat. “Well that’s considerate, I guess,” she mumbled into the back of Satsuki’s neck.

Satsuki grunted before falling silent. Ryuko waited for five minutes but when Satsuki showed no more signs of giving up any late-night confessions, she relaxed ever so slightly and began succumbing to sleep. Ryuko wasn’t sure if she imagined it or not, but as sleep gripped at her consciousness and pulled her under, she could have sworn she heard something reach her ears before she drifted off completely, a breathy whisper tinting her dreams pink.

“I love you, Ryuko.”

Chapter 29

Despite the heavy conversation she'd had mere hours before, Ryuko woke up feeling strangely optimistic, though she wasn't sure why. Finding Satsuki still snoring lightly beside her, Ryuko rolled out of bed agilely and made her way to the kitchen, deciding to make breakfast for the two of them. She whistled a random tune as she rifled through the fridge for ingredients, squashing their loaf of sliced bread as she attempted to remove the box of eggs from the back of the shelf. Shrugging, she turned on the stove and began preparing omelettes packed with vegetables on one pan and bacon in another. As she worked, she prepared the kettle for her sister's tea and sliced up a melon.

Her ears perked up as she heard papers fluttering in the distance. Realizing the mail must have been delivered, she pranced to the front door and gathered the few arrivals laying scattered on the floor. Flipping through the envelopes lazily, she noticed a postcard depicting a beautiful beach near the bottom of the pile. Curious, she tossed the rest of the mail onto the kitchen table for Satsuki to deal with later and examined the postcard closer. In the top left corner of the card was a tiny map of Italy. She flicked her wrist, exposing the back of the postcard and noticed tiny, neat handwriting that she did not recognize. The top of the card was dated two months prior, and Ryuko found herself wondering how long it had taken for the card to reach their new home. Figuring this was a result of the move and the post office still redirecting mail to this residence, she began reading the message.

*Ojou-sama, This vacation has done me much good.
I've purchased a home here in Italy,
but I plan to split my time between here and Japan.
I return to Japan in a week for a few months.
Please get in touch with me when you find the time.
-Soroi.*

That old butler dude that always gave Satsuki her tea? I bet it would be really cool if they got to see each other again and maybe he could help Satsuki feel better. Smiling, Ryuko propped the card against the steaming cup of tea that was now waiting on the table to be consumed with the rest of their breakfast.

Grinning mischievously, Ryuko snuck back towards their bedroom and slowly pushed the door open enough to peep through. Satsuki was lying on her side, completely still and unaware of the world. Ryuko pushed the door open enough to slide through, then crouched on the ground and moved stealthily towards the bed. Once within a few feet of their sleeping spot, Ryuko jumped upwards in a motion that was comically frog-like and tackled the sleeping girl. Satsuki's eyes snapped open immediately and she automatically aimed her fist at the first surface she could reach, which just so happened to be Ryuko's stomach. An audible whoosh of breath left Ryuko's mouth before she rolled off the bed and landed with a thump on the carpet, attempting to gasp for air as she clutched at her chest uselessly. Startled, Satsuki peered over the edge of the bed at Ryuko, who managed to wheeze out a raspy "Why this?"

"Why would you even think that was a good idea?" Satsuki asked, failing to mask the surprise in her voice.

“Don’t...know,” Ryuko gasped out before her breathing muscles recovered, allowing her to take in several deep breaths.

The older girl slid off of the mattress and offered an open hand to Ryuko, who willingly accepted it. Satsuki pulled her up into a standing position before stating, “I’d say sorry but I think you got what was coming to you, to be honest.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. That fucking killed. Come eat breakfast. There’s a surprise for you.”

Ryuko dragged her curious sister to the kitchen and shouted “Ta-da!” while striking the Will Smith pose towards the breakfast she’d made. Satsuki rolled her eyes but smiled and took her place at the table, eyes finally landing on the postcard.

“What’s this?” she asked, gripping it lightly in her hands.

“It’s from that butler guy. It came in the mail today. Dunno how long it took to get to us but he sent it a few months ago,” Ryuko responded as she sipped on some orange juice.

Satsuki hummed as she flipped the card over and read the neat script. A small smile graced her lips as she reread the message before taking a sip of her tea.

“So are you gonna go see him or what?” Ryuko probed as she stuffed her mouth with food.

“Yes, I believe we are much overdue for a get-together. I’d like to thank him for everything he’s done for me over the years,” she murmured as her eyes took on a faraway look.

Ryuko shifted in her seat so she could reach the bacon and shoved a whole strip into her mouth at once. She watched as her sister continued to stare into space for a minute before hopping up and shuffling to the cupboard. “Almost forgot to give you this today,” Ryuko commented as she shook two pills from the bottle she’d procured and placed them on the table next to the postcard.

Emerging from her daze, Satsuki looked down at the pills and muttered a barely audible “Thanks.” Ryuko engaged Satsuki in light conversation for the rest of breakfast before clearing their plates and offering to do the dishes.

“Why are you in such a good mood today?” Satsuki implored as Ryuko sang under her breath while scrubbing the pans.

“Huh? Oh, uh. Well, I don’t know. I guess I just woke up feeling good, ya know?” Ryuko replied. *I probably just got a lot of sleep last night and don’t feel sleep deprived for once. That’s probably it.*

Deciding to indulge in her good mood, Ryuko decided to take a bath after the dishes as a reward for being such a good cook. Stealing the pink bath bomb that Nonon had gotten Satsuki as a housewarming gift a few months back, Ryuko tossed it into the tub, knowing full well that Satsuki would never be able to use it. As she slipped into the water slowly, hissing slightly as the hot, pink water engulfed her, her muscles loosened up and she leaned against the back of the tub, letting her eyes flutter shut. A second later, a knock on the bathroom door startled her out of her relaxed state.

“Ryuko, I’m going to go to the store. I want to buy a gift for Soroi before I see him.”

“Want me to come with?” Ryuko called back, hoping Satsuki would say no so she could continue her bath.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Satsuki replied, “No, I should be fine on my own. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Cool. Oh, can you pick up a few lemons while you’re out? And maybe that chocolate that I really like? Potato chips, too!” she pleaded hopefully. Grinning mischievously at the sound of a sigh filtering through the door, she fist pumped as Satsuki grumbled, “Fine. Goodbye.”

“Music to my ears,” Ryuko mumbled as she sank lower into the bath and closed her eyes, savoring the pleasant sensation of the warm, fragrant water around her. A few minutes passed, the silence in the air occasionally punctuated by the sound of Ryuko blowing bubbles through her nose into the bath water. With her mind at ease, a memory floated into her consciousness. Sputtering suddenly, Ryuko jerked her head upward and opened her eyes, replaying the memory of her conversation with Satsuki the night before in her mind.

“Fuck,” she muttered as Satsuki’s voice proclaiming “*I want to drink again*” echoed through her head. “I hope she doesn’t try anything stupid while she’s out shopping. Or, wait...what if she’s not really shopping at all? God, I’m so dumb,” she growled, lashing out at the water in front of her.

You should trust her more, said a voice in the back of her head. Contemplating for a minute, Ryuko finally settled back against the back of the tub, albeit not completely willingly. *Okay, how about this? Today will be like a test. If she comes home and everything is fine, then I can trust her to not give in. After all, I won’t be around her 100% of the time so I need to know she can get along without me. I’ll just have to make sure she’s sober when she gets home and also make sure she didn’t buy any alcohol while shopping. Easy enough, right? Yeah, nothing to worry about. Fuck.*

Slithering downwards, Ryuko let the water come up over her nose, allowing her to blow bubbles once more in an attempt to dispel some of her anxiety. She began replaying the conversation in its entirety in her head, looking for a sign indicating that Satsuki might slip up, but nothing seemed to stick out as a red flag besides the fact that she had stated she wanted to drink. Shrugging, Ryuko closed her eyes once more, until another memory from the night before infiltrated her mind.

“Holy shit!” she yelled, sitting up rapidly and spilling water all over their bathroom floor. *Satsuki said she loved me last night! Holy shit, holy shit, oh my god. What does this mean? What if she only meant it in, like, a sister way? She probably didn’t mean it how I want her to mean it, I mean that would be insane, right? I have done a lot for her so if anything it’s in the whole ‘I’m glad you support me because we are family’ way, not the fucked up way I feel for her. Shit. I’m so fucked up, getting so excited like that over my sister. My drop-dead gorgeous sister. Fuck! Control yourself, you dumbass.*

Ryuko stood then, draining the tub and rinsing herself off with ice cold water. A nervous energy had gripped her, setting her into motion. After her shower, she mopped the bathroom floor then cleaned the bathroom in its entirety. An hour later, their entire home had been cleaned by the whirlwind that was Ryuko. The sound of the front door opening caught her attention. She sprinted to the door to greet her sister eagerly. Satsuki’s arms were laden with shopping bags, which Ryuko immediately began snatching from her grip in an attempt to help.

“Relax, will you?” Satsuki griped as one of the bags tore open, spilling its contents onto the floor. An animalistic grunt was the only response she received as her sister took the majority of the bags to the kitchen. Grumbling under her breath, Satsuki began cleaning the mess Ryuko had just created, piling some chocolate, fruit, and pretzels into her arms before following Ryuko to the kitchen.

Despite the spotlessness of everything else in the kitchen, the destruction that Ryuko had just wreaked on the purchases had Satsuki speechless. Every bag had been torn open, as if the process of opening the bag and pulling the items out calmly was too much effort. Pieces of plastic littered the floor and the counter, a bag of chips had already been opened and was currently being

consumed, the egg container was lying upside down and dangerously close to plunging to the floor below, and the other groceries were scattered haphazardly along the length of their kitchen counter.

“What is wrong with you today?” Satsuki frowned, taking in the mess as she began putting the groceries in the pantry. Ryuko’s head snapped up, mouth full of chips and eyes bright with something Satsuki couldn’t identify. Before she got an answer, her sister had bolted from the room, clutching the bag of chips to her chest as she escaped.

“Hey!” Satsuki shouted. “What about this mess?!”

Hearing nothing but silence, Satsuki sighed and continued sorting her purchases, making sure her gift for Soroi was put to the side so she’d remember to wrap it. “Disgraceful,” she murmured as she began grabbing pieces of shredded plastic bags and disposing of them. “What’s gotten into her, anyway?”

Ryuko, meanwhile, had scrambled into the closet in the hallway leading to their bedroom and was hidden inside of it, munching on chips like a wild animal. She froze and held her breath as she heard footsteps approaching.

“Ryuko, you are acting very strange today. Why are you hiding?”

To be honest, Ryuko had no idea why she was acting like such a freak, but anything that distracted her from her feelings, for even the smallest amount of time, was worth the consequences. The footsteps continued past the closet and into the bedroom. She could hear Satsuki searching around the bedroom, quietly calling out Ryuko’s name, but Ryuko remained statuesque, taking in quiet, shallow breaths to avoid the hawk-like detection of Satsuki. A groan of frustration, followed by silence, filtered through the wall from the bedroom into Ryuko’s hiding place. After a few minutes of stillness, Ryuko became nervous.

What happened? Did she stop looking? What is she doing right now?

Her eye twitched and her ears perked up, but she still could not detect any noise on Satsuki’s end. The closet door was wrenched open then, startling Ryuko into action. Satsuki stood blocking the doorway with a wide stance, arms open and ready to contain Ryuko, but Ryuko had both the size and speed advantage; abandoning her chips, she dove between Satsuki’s legs and somersaulted once, landing in a crouch behind her sister. Wasting no time, the shorter girl vaulted forward as her sister turned rapidly to face her. Ryuko sprinted through their home with Satsuki in hot pursuit.

I wish this was that fucking mansion so I could have more space to hide...or at least more room to run.

Turning the corner into the kitchen, Ryuko dashed through to the dining area then took a sharp turn into the living room. Hopping over furniture like a professional hurdler (and only tripping up once), Ryuko continued her evasive maneuvers, though Satsuki was relentless in her pursuit.

If I go to the bedroom then through to the bathroom, I can probably slow her down with the doors and--

“Oof!” Ryuko grunted as she was tackled from behind. Satsuki’s arms were wrapped securely around her waist, her iron grip proving too strong to be broken, even against Ryuko’s desperate wriggling and squirming. “NO!” Ryuko screamed into the carpet as Satsuki moved a hand to Ryuko’s side and began tickling. Attempting to roll over appeared to be futile; besides having Satsuki’s whole weight laying on top of her, the hand tickling her was simultaneously holding her down and making her movements uncoordinated as a result of the unpleasant tickling sensation.

The arm wrapped around her waist suddenly whipped her around, slamming her onto her back and nearly knocking the wind out of her. Satsuki had the upper hand now; she sat on Ryuko's legs while pinning her arms on either side of her body. For a moment, both girls merely stared at each other, breathing heavily from exertion.

"Why are you being such a freak today?" Satsuki demanded as her breathing slowed.

The younger girl twisted her lower body in an attempt to break free of her sister's hold but failed.

"I will keep you here until I get an answer," Satsuki threatened, leaning closer to Ryuko menacingly.

Ryuko's breath hitched at their proximity; her eyes flicked to her sister's lips and back to her eyes before she froze suddenly, the fight draining from her body. Satsuki was visibly surprised at Ryuko's abrupt surrender and her face displayed a hint of concern. "What's wrong?" she asked softly. "Just tell me so I can help you."

Ryuko turned her head away and murmured, "There's nothing you can do to help me."

"Well, how can you know that if you don't even tell me what's bothering you?"

Ryuko barked out a humorless laugh. "Trust me, there is no way you can help me with this."

Hurt flashed through Satsuki's eyes and she quickly contained it, but not before Ryuko had noticed, grimacing as guilt seeped into her chest. Feigning indifference, Satsuki loosened her grip ever so slightly on Ryuko's arms and replied, "Well, if that's how you really feel then I guess--"

She was silenced by the sensation of Ryuko's lips on her own. Startled, Satsuki's eyes widened, but as quickly as it had happened it was over. They stared at each other for a split second, Satsuki with her jaw hanging open and Ryuko with tears in her eyes, before Satsuki found herself knocked onto the floor. The element of surprise had given Ryuko the advantage, allowing her to push Satsuki off of her and disappear. Satsuki sat against the wall behind her, fingers lightly brushing her lips, a faraway look in her eyes. From the other side of the house, the sound of the front door slamming shut reverberated through the residence, leaving silence in its wake.

She wasn't sure how long she'd sat on the floor, knees pulled up to her chest and fingers resting against her lips, but she knew it had been a while; her legs and bottom had long since gone numb, the tingling in her limbs mimicking the static filling her mind. Eventually, as darkness descended and permeated their home, she forced herself up and to the kitchen, grabbing a snack before retreating to the empty bedroom. Ryuko had not returned, nor did it appear that she would be coming home any time soon; the bedside clock displaying 10:17PM suggested as much. Warily, Satsuki crawled under the covers, suppressing thoughts about how big and cold the bed seemed without her sister beside her. She hadn't slept alone in months, after all. Forcing her mind to turn off, Satsuki closed her eyes and attempted to fall asleep. After an hour of tossing and turning, sleep finally overtook her.

She wasn't entirely surprised when she woke up at three in the morning, covered in sweat and trembling violently, but that did not make the event any more tolerable. Satsuki struggled to catch her breath as panic bubbled upward from her chest, choking her relentlessly. She frantically reached for the nightstand and wrenched open the drawer, withdrawing the pill container she kept

stashed for emergencies. Satsuki shakily attempted to extract an Ativan from the container while reminding herself to control her breathing; popping the pill into her mouth, she snatched a bottle of water out of the drawer and drank from it carefully, using the process of swallowing to slow her breathing.

Ten minutes of tension gave way to a slowly spreading sense of serenity, erasing the feelings of panic and leaving tranquility in its wake. Sighing in relief, Satsuki rubbed the tears from her eyes and replaced the pill container and water bottle in the bedside drawer. Despite wanting to mentally bash Ryuko for abandoning her when she *knew* that she could not sleep peacefully without her, Satsuki pushed all thoughts of her sister out of her head before succumbing to a drug-induced slumber.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ryuko had not stopped running since she'd fled her home hours earlier; her lungs and legs were burning furiously but she willed herself to keep moving, keep running until she could not move anymore. As darkness fell, she collapsed in a heap miles from her home, lying prone on a soft patch of grass. Gulping down air, she looked up and around at her surroundings. She hadn't thought that she had been sprinting anywhere in particular as she'd made her way up and down streets, passing buildings and store fronts, but she was surprised to find that this was not an unfamiliar area. In fact, as she jerked her head to the left, she realized that she was in the Mankanshoku's backyard.

Figuring this was as good a place as any to rest, she managed to push herself up onto her hands and knees and crawl shakily to the front door. As she rapped her knuckles against the hard surface of the door, an explosion of noise erupted; the barking of a dog, followed by frantic footsteps and shuffling gave way to the creaking of the door as it swung open. Ryuko cleared her throat as the entire Mankanshoku family stood expectantly at the door, staring at a point above her head. As they finally adjusted their gazes and saw Ryuko on sitting on their doorstep, they simultaneously tackled her, gathering her into a huge hug.

"Ryuko-chan, what are you doing here so late at night?"

"It's a long story...can I sleep here tonight?"

The family ushered her inside, Mako offering her best friend a shoulder so she wouldn't have to crawl inside. Sukuyo bustled down the hall, setting up the guest bedroom (a luxury they never would have been able to have as no stars under Satsuki's regime). By the time she had returned, Ryuko had passed out on the couch from exhaustion, despite the rest of the family talking her ear off.

"Can't you see the poor girl is exhausted? Barazo, help me carry her to the bed." Ryuko's unofficial parents carefully transported her to the bedroom and tucked her in, Sukuyo remaining behind an extra minute to make sure her husband and Mataro had vacated the room. Undisturbed, Ryuko slept peacefully, recovering from her vigorous activity.

Ryuko woke with a jolt, drool coating the side of her mouth. She sat up abruptly and rubbed the sleep from her eyes and the moisture from her face before sitting on the edge of the bed and staring blankly out the window for a few minutes, allowing her mind to slowly wake up. Outside the sun was setting, splashing the sky with deep purple, vibrant red, and darkening blue. Ryuko stood and stretched, emitting a loud yawn as she did.

How long did I sleep?

Meandering to the door, Ryuko quietly turned the knob and stuck her head out into the hallway. The home was uncharacteristically silent. Heading to the kitchen, Ryuko spotted a note taped to the fridge stating that the family had gotten bored waiting for her to wake up since she'd been sleeping for over eighteen hours and had gone out to dinner and a movie, but that Sukuyo had made croquettes and left them in the fridge. Smiling, Ryuko opened the fridge and pulled out a foil

covered plate. Tossing the note and the foil in the trash, Ryuko placed the croquettes in the microwave and slammed the door shut, arbitrarily punching in numbers and pressing start. She plopped down into a chair at the table and rested her head in her hand as the microwave hummed.

Over eighteen hours, huh? But what time did they write the note? I must have been here a long ass time since I got here at nightfall yesterday...almost 24 hours ago, then. That was some good sleep though.

She pushed out the insistent memories of the night before as the microwave dinged. Happy for the distraction, she pulled the heaping plate of steaming croquettes from the beeping appliance and began eating voraciously.

I'm gonna need the energy to deal with the shitstorm that's gonna go down when I get home thanks to my dumb ass.

After eating, Ryuko found herself stalling; she washed the dishes piled in the sink, then returned to the guest bedroom and straightened out the bed, tucking the blanket corners in with military precision. She paced around the room for a few minutes, biting her thumbnail before she resolved herself to just get it over with. Determinedly she marched out of the Mankanshoku household and jammed her hands into her pockets as she began the trek through the darkness to her home.

Ryuko cursed under her breath as she swatted various bugs away from the faint glow her streak was emitting as a result of her nervousness, making the walk home incredibly annoying. By the time Ryuko arrived home she was seething. "Fuck OFF!" she hissed as a moth approached her face. She swung her fist at the moth in an attempt to punch it but failed spectacularly and nearly assaulted her own eye. She clenched her teeth to contain the scream of frustration threatening to burst forth. Unlocking her front door, Ryuko swung the door open and closed as quickly as she could to prevent any bugs from following her into the house. A sigh of relief escaped her as she realized she had succeeded at stopping any insects from entering.

She kicked her shoes off and ambled through the darkness to the kitchen where she tossed her keys onto the counter and opened the fridge, withdrawing a bottle of lemonade. She chugged the contents of the bottle before finally turning to the faint green glow of the digital clock resting on the counter.

Half past ten. I wonder if Satsuki is sleeping...

Having had plenty of time on her walk home to talk herself out of expecting any type of positive reaction from her sister, Ryuko resigned herself to facing Satsuki as soon as possible to diffuse any tension. However as she entered their bedroom, mouth open and prepared to get the first word in, she found Satsuki snoring lightly under the covers with a book lying abandoned beside her, the bedside lamp still illuminating the room. Ryuko deflated.

All that planning for nothing, she lamented internally as she instead made a beeline for the bathroom. After brushing her teeth and readying herself for bed she tiptoed back into the room towards the lamp, intent on turning it off. Noticing that the drawer of the nightstand was slightly ajar, Ryuko hooked a finger inside and pulled gently.

Ahh, shit. Guilt seeped through her chest when she realized that Satsuki had resorted to taking a sleeping pill for the first time. *No wonder she's out cold already.*

Extinguishing the lamp, Ryuko walked back to her side of the bed and cautiously climbed onto the mattress, sitting with her back against the headboard. Not feeling tired in the slightest, Ryuko reached into the drawer of her own nightstand and extracted her handheld gaming device. Certain

the sound was off and the light was set to the dimmest setting, she occupied herself with the game until her eyes finally began to droop around four in the morning. Satisfied with her progress for the night, she turned off the game and slid down to a lying position, falling asleep almost instantly.

Unfortunately for her, she woke early in the morning, her body unable to sleep after the many hours she'd slept the day before. Groaning, she flopped dramatically onto her stomach and buried her face in her pillow, huffing unhappily. The sun was bright outside and birds sang happily, their song drifting through the thin windows and piercing Ryuko's ears.

God damn, why are birds even awake this fuckin' early? Go back to fucking sleep!

Just then, Ryuko sensed something from the person sleeping next to her. Immediately she froze and listened intently, face still hidden in her pillow.

Her breathing changed...she's awake but pretending not to be. That's probably my fault, though.

After debating internally for a few minutes whether or not to just get the conversation over with, Ryuko turned her head to the side and peeked at Satsuki's side of the bed. Satsuki was breathing peacefully, but every so often her eyebrow would twitch, a sure sign that she was no longer asleep. Her mouth had taken on a slight downward turn and her forehead had wrinkled just enough to betray her act.

"I know you're awake," Ryuko mumbled as she tried to suppress the sudden bout of nervousness filling her chest. Satsuki pursed her lips before turning onto her side, facing away from Ryuko. "Oh, come on, don't be like that," Ryuko pleaded, a hint of frustration evident in her voice as she propped herself up on one elbow. "We have to talk about this eventually, ya know."

Satsuki remained silent.

"Fine. If you're gonna be that way then I'm just gonna talk and you can listen." Ryuko took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I've had some time to think the past couple of days about certain... feelings...that I have and what I did wasn't fair but it just kinda happened before I could stop myself and I don't wanna mess up the relationship we have 'cause I think what we have right now is really good and I was being dumb and not thinking about how you might feel and that was totally wrong and--" She was silenced by Satsuki placing a solitary finger over her lips.

"You're rambling," Satsuki replied quietly. Ryuko gulped. Sighing, Satsuki laid back against the pillows and gazed up at the ceiling, one arm resting over her forehead. Both girls were silent for a while, Ryuko anxiously watching Satsuki and Satsuki nonchalantly watching the ceiling. Finally Satsuki spoke up.

"So you're saying that you have romantic feelings for me?"

"I-I mean, I guess? It feels like it," Ryuko stuttered in reply, "but obviously if you don't feel the same in return I won't make it weird for you. I won't force you into anything you don't want."

"Can I believe that when you have already failed at controlling yourself?"

Despite the lack of malice in the statement, Ryuko found herself recoiling slightly. *I mean, she's not wrong. I definitely crossed one of the boundaries that she set up forever ago by touching her face, not to mention that the nature of the touch was pretty fucked up, considering her past. Damn, I really screwed up. I'm such an idiot!*

"Listen, I am so, so sorry about the other day. I just didn't know how to say how I was feeling and it just happened. I know that's not an excuse but I hope you can forgive me for being a dumbass,"

she pleaded, struggling to hold back the fear in her voice.

Satsuki sighed and ran a hand down the side of her face before rubbing her temples in an attempt to stave off an incoming headache. “Look, Ryuko. I need some time to think about all this. I’ve got a lot going on right now and I need to sort through my own problems before anything else. I can’t give you an answer right now.”

“Yeah, yeah alright, take all the time you need,” Ryuko responded, trying to mask the disappointment in her voice. “I’ll just, uh, be here like always. Try not to let my feelings get in the way of your stuff, okay?”

And so began the longest week of Ryuko’s life. She tried to make herself scarce during the days to atone for springing all of these emotions onto Satsuki, though she made sure to go to bed when Satsuki retired for the evening each night so Satsuki could sleep through the night. By day 5, Ryuko thought she was going to go crazy. Satsuki had not brought up anything concerning their conversation from days before and both girls had reverted to awkward small talk when conversing (though this was mostly Ryuko’s fault; she’d subconsciously taken to not speaking unless spoken to because of how guilty she felt). After eight days of dealing with their altered dynamic Satsuki finally turned to Ryuko as they lay in bed, slivers of moonlight providing just enough illumination to see each other.

“Are you still awake?” Satsuki murmured. Ryuko grunted an affirmation. “Good, because I need to talk to you.”

“Mhmm,” Ryuko hummed as she struggled to open her eyes. Turns out being hyperaware of her every move around Satsuki was exhausting work.

“I need to ask you something.”

“Go ‘head,” Ryuko mumbled.

“Are you...do you feel...sexual attraction towards me?” Satsuki asked as her cheeks became tinged with pink.

Ryuko’s eyes flew open as her own face burned bright red. “Really?! That’s how you start the conversation?” Satsuki merely shrugged and nodded. “Damn, just jump right in, I see how it is,” Ryuko grumbled, hiding her face in her pillow.

“So...?” Satsuki prompted after Ryuko remained quiet for over a minute.

“I mean, before the whole sister thing, I thought you were hot. Like really fuckin’ hot. Once I found out we were sisters I tried to sorta push those thoughts outta my head but they always kinda crept back in when I let my guard down. So I guess that I still do think you’re attractive, as much as I try not to,” she admitted.

Satsuki’s forehead wrinkled in concern for a moment before she posed her next question. “So did you only help me out back in the beginning, after the hospitalization, because of those feelings for me?”

“Nah, you big dummy. You’re still my sister and you’re the only real family that I have. I didn’t want to lose you, too. As shitty as your situation’s been, it’s at least let us get to know each other while not attempting to slice each other to pieces with swords,” she chuckled. A tiny smile formed on Satsuki’s face, causing Ryuko to relax ever so slightly. However, the smile suddenly seemed mixed with sadness. Ryuko furrowed her eyebrows, anticipating bad news.

“I don’t know how to explain myself in this situation,” Satsuki began, “but I don’t find myself sexually attracted to you.”

Ryuko’s face morphed into a combination of embarrassment, disappointment, and a bit of hurt. She opened her mouth to interject, to say *anything* to make this situation any less terrible for herself than it already was, but Satsuki cut her off.

“It’s not you, I don’t think. I just don’t think I feel sexually attracted to *anyone*, if that makes sense. I have never looked at someone and thought ‘wow, I’d like to...for lack of a better term, bang them.’ I mean, I think there are people who are aesthetically attractive, if that makes sense? But I’ve just never been interested in sex. I don’t even really understand why people enjoy it, because to me it seems...gross.”

Ryuko was silent as she absorbed Satsuki’s confession, then blurted out, “Do you think it’s because of what Ragyo did to you? Because--”

“I don’t think that Ragyo’s influence would prevent me from feeling any sort of physical attraction towards people, don’t you think? I’d understand if I were having problems with intimacy with someone that I was attracted to but I just...don’t feel that attraction. I don’t know else how to explain it.”

Ryuko chewed on her lip as she considered this. “Okay, well if that’s the case, how come you kissed me on the forehead that one time? And don’t say that was a normal sisterly kiss, it lasted way longer than it should have.”

“Ah. Right.” Satsuki averted her gaze momentarily as she gathered her thoughts. Finally, she huffed and returned her gaze to Ryuko’s curious visage. “Listen. I never had time to think about romance growing up with the whole ‘saving the world’ thing looming over my head. Then, after everything was all said and done, this stupid depression popped up and made it so I could barely feed myself, let alone think about love. Now that I’ve been somewhat better...I mean, you have been here for me almost 24/7 since I got out of the hospital, and you’ve done so much for me in all that time, stuff that I’d never consider letting anyone else do for me, not even the Elites. I do not like opening myself up to others and being vulnerable. But you, you wormed your way through all of my defenses and now you know more about me than anyone else. You have a special place in my heart and I didn’t think a simple hug could convey that to you. I really do love you, you know. But it feels different than the love I feel towards the rest of my friends, even though I’ve known them longer.”

Ryuko’s eyes widened. “So what are you saying then?”

“I’m...not sure yet. But I think that I might be...romantically attracted to you. But don’t get too excited. I’m still trying to work it all out in my head.”

Despite this warning, Ryuko was beaming. “You love me!” she singsonged, waggling her eyebrows animatedly. Satsuki punched her arm as hard as she could. “Ow, fucking ow!” Ryuko cried out as she gripped her arm, eyes shining with pained tears or mirth (or both, Satsuki wasn’t sure).

“Don’t make me change my mind,” Satsuki growled, though she couldn’t prevent a hint of amusement from playing out over her face. “Like I said, it is a completely new concept to me and I’m having trouble processing it all, so I can’t promise you anything right now.”

“I know. I’m just happy that this went way better than expected. I was totally expecting you to kick me outta the house or something like that. I never woulda imagined in my wildest dreams that I’d

even get a positive reaction from you.”

Playfully, Satsuki acted offended. “As if I could ever kick you out. I need you around if I ever want to get a good night’s sleep!”

“So that’s why you’ve kept me around this long, eh? I thought it was because of my killer looks and cooking skills,” Ryuko shot back with a cocky grin.

“Alright, don’t get too full of yourself. Your cooking could use some improvement.”

Ryuko’s face became serious. “H-Hey, you love when I cook for you, don’t you?”

Satsuki rolled her eyes. “Of course I do. Who doesn’t love a home cooked meal? Quit taking everything so seriously.”

Ryuko’s face softened and she chuckled with relief. “Damn, nee-san, you almost had me there.”

Satsuki merely shook her head and yawned. “Well, now that that’s out of the way, can we go to sleep? I’m exhausted.”

“You’re the one that woke me up so we could have this little chat. If anything, I should be the one complaining,” Ryuko laughed.

Satsuki merely shrugged before reaching out and pulling Ryuko into an awkward side-lying embrace. The red-streaked girl returned it as well as she could with her free arm. As they pulled apart, Satsuki instructed her sister to roll over; once she’d complied, Satsuki wrapped her arm around Ryuko’s waist and pulled her closer, opting to be the big spoon for once. Ryuko couldn’t help scrunching her nose up and smiling widely as she listened to her sister’s breathing slow and eventually even out. It was with an intense feeling of elation that she eventually descended into slumber herself.

Chapter End Notes

I’m still here and definitely not abandoning this story, I’ve just been adjusting to my new job and all that jazz. I figured that since I already gave Satsuki my depression she might as well have my asexuality too (though I have had this headcanon for a while; I thought long and hard about whether or not to include it in this story but hey why the hell not). Satsuki trying to explain her asexuality=me every time I try to come out. My favorite response so far to asking someone if they knew what asexual meant: "That's when you're only attracted to yourself, right?" Ehh, what can you do. Anyway, comments are always appreciated, and I appreciate all of you for sticking with this story! :)

Chapter 31

Sunlight filtered into the bedroom between the gaps in the blinds, bathing the space in a soft golden glow. Satsuki, having awoken nearly half an hour ago, remained still in an attempt to prevent Ryuko from waking. She took comfort in the way the younger girl's back rose and fell against her chest with each puff of air she pushed through her lungs. Sometime during the night, Ryuko had latched onto the hand that Satsuki had draped over her waist and had intertwined their fingers, making any kind of early morning escape impossible for Satsuki. Having accepted her fate, she'd resigned herself to staring contemplatively at the back of Ryuko's head, reflecting on their conversation from the night before.

She was certain that she did not necessarily regret anything she'd said hours before, but she was definitely starting to have doubts about the implications of their confessions. Sifting through the growing list of reasons this was likely a terrible idea, she began to ruminate over the most glaring issue, namely their blood relation.

Fortunately it is unlikely that there is any sort of record pointing to the fact that we are sisters, save for Ragyo's testimony, and since she and father are dead there's no way for anyone to prove we are sisters. However, the people close to us definitely know. I wonder how the elites would take the news that I'm...dating my younger sister? Wait, are we actually dating now? Satsuki's eyebrows furrowed in thought.

Shifting "friends' opinions" and "status of relationship" lower on her priority list, she briefly considered how Ryuko felt about the taboo nature of their relationship but decided that Ryuko clearly didn't care enough about it to let it deter her from pursuing it.

Well, in that case, what about how it will impact the relationship that we have? Will this change things between us? What if we get in a fight and ruin what we already have going? At this point I still need Ryuko's support and I don't want to risk jeopardizing that by jumping into something like this. Although, technically we already do most of the stuff that I presume regular couples do. We sleep in the same bed, live together, run errands together...perhaps it wouldn't be so difficult to make it work. Well, except for--

Her thoughts were interrupted as Ryuko startled in her sleep, jerking slightly as her eyes flew open. "Shit," she muttered groggily, releasing Satsuki's hand to rub at her eyes.

"What happened?" Satsuki asked as Ryuko rolled onto her back.

"Dreamt I was in my video game and was doing hella good but then I got ambushed." Satsuki stared at her pointedly, causing Ryuko to look away sheepishly. "Alright, you might have a point. Maybe I do play video games slightly more frequently than I should."

"Slightly? You are literally dreaming about them now," Satsuki smirked, victorious.

"What the fuck ever, it's not like I have anything else to do all day."

"Perhaps you could spend more time with Mako? My outing with Soroi is today, it would be a good opportunity for you to get out of the house."

Ryuko shrugged noncommittally as she rolled out of bed and stretched, stifling a yawn. "Gotta make sure she's not hanging out with Gamagoori first," she grumbled somewhat bitterly under her breath as she padded out of the bedroom to the kitchen with Satsuki not far behind. Satsuki quirked

an eyebrow at her sister but didn't comment on Ryuko's statement, instead opting to prepare tea for herself as Ryuko popped a couple of raspberry toaster strudels into the toaster.

"What are you doing with Soroi?" Ryuko inquired as she poured herself a glass of milk.

"We are meeting for lunch around noon and then taking it from there," Satsuki replied, popping her morning meds into her mouth and chasing them with water from the tap.

"That'll be cool. You should make a day out of it. Take your time and catch up with him. I think I'm gonna run into town and do some shopping, so I won't be around while you're out." Ryuko drizzled white frosting over her toaster strudels, subconsciously starting out with an X shape that looked suspiciously like the eye of her former kamui.

"While you're out, do me a favor and pick up my prescriptions at the pharmacy. I'm almost out of my meds." Ryuko absently grunted an affirmation as she bit into her breakfast, letting the sweet fruity filling fill her mouth.

Hours later, Ryuko returned home from her outing, multiple shopping bags strung along her arms as she attempted to bring all of her purchases in from the car at once. Reaching the kitchen table, she shed the bags and sighed in relief. "Success," she muttered victoriously under her breath as she flexed her arms a few times to loosen her muscles. Her shopping trip had been a fruitful one, and she'd been so efficient she'd even managed to pay a quick visit to Senketsu's makeshift grave at her old home. She began placing all the items in their respective places in the fridge and pantry, then stocked Satsuki's refilled prescriptions in the cupboard next to the nearly empty bottles.

As she worked, she reflected on the time she'd spent at Senketsu's grave, talking to him about all her problems and the happenings in her life, including the developments from the night prior. She felt pretty good about the whole situation and was looking forward to whatever the future held for her and Satsuki. Grinning, she hummed a cheerful tune as she finished putting the groceries away and disposed of the plastic grocery bags in the trash (a practice for which Satsuki would have reprimanded her had she been home to do so, seeing as she was more environmentally conscious than her younger sibling).

Ryuko heard the front door close as she pulled a bottle of lemonade out of the fridge and perked up, eager to see how her sister's day with Soroi had been. To her surprise, the man in question stood in the doorway with Satsuki at his side, a kind smile gracing his face as always. Ryuko offered a small smile and a wave.

"Good evening, Ms. Matoi. How are you this fine day?"

Ryuko chuckled. "I'm cool, how 'bout you?"

"I am doing well, thank you for asking," he replied genially.

Satsuki shepherded him into the dining room, ushering him to a seat at the table. "Sit tight," she instructed him before she rejoined Ryuko in the kitchen. She began bustling around the kitchen, gathering supplies to make tea.

"I told him he could stay for dinner, if that's alright with you," Satsuki explained as she filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove.

"I don't give a shit," Ryuko responded, amused. "Do you want me to leave so you guys can--"

“No, no, I was hoping you’d join us, actually,” Satsuki interrupted, gathering a couple of saucers and tea cups from the cabinet.

“Yeah, that’s fine, I’d love--”

“I also need you to cook for us while I entertain him,” Satsuki replied sheepishly, a pleading look in her eyes.

“I mean, alright I guess...” Ryuko trailed off, noticing that Satsuki seemed nervous as she skittered about the kitchen. “You alright, Sats?”

“I’m fine, I just want this to go well. I owe him so much and I want to repay at least some of what I owe him.”

“Dude, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t think you owe him anything. And also,” she pushed Satsuki away from the stove where the kettle had begun to screech and towards the dining room, “I’ll take care of this, don’t worry.” She flashed Satsuki a dazzling smile in an attempt to assure her that all would go well. Satsuki’s eyebrows unfurrowed as a grateful look passed over her face before she was forcibly pushed into the dining room. Ryuko prepared the tea and delivered it to her sister and her guest before retreating back to the kitchen.

Appraising the ingredients in the newly stocked fridge, Ryuko picked out the desired items before she began cooking. Forty-five minutes later, she wiped her brow as she looked at the three course meal waiting to be consumed. She carried the food to the dining room and set up the pots and pans as artistically as she could on the table. Ryuko doled out servings onto the plates before finally sitting at the table and allowing herself to relax with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Ms. Matoi, everything looks delicious,” Soroi commented as he picked up his silverware.

“Dig in!” Ryuko replied exuberantly, mouth watering in anticipation. The trio ate together and made small talk led by Satsuki, who was sure to include Ryuko and Soroi equally in the conversations. As the setting sun dropped below the horizon, Soroi stood apologetically.

“My apologies, milady, but I must take my leave. I return to Italy in a few days and I’m afraid I’m dreadfully behind with my packing.”

Satsuki smiled as she stood to show him to the door. “Don’t feel bad. I’ve taken up too much of your time today anyway. We should keep in touch, perhaps exchange letters while you’re out of the country.”

“You could never take up too much of my time. And I will gladly write to you, especially now that I have your new address,” he replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

Ryuko nodded her goodbye to Soroi as Satsuki walked him to the front door. She could sense that her sister wanted to have a moment alone with her former butler, so Ryuko began clearing the table of the various pots, pans, and plates littering its surface and placing them in the sink. She ran the water until it became warm and began washing the dishes, humming quietly as she did so. Every so often she’d check the clock on the oven; before she knew it, 15 minutes had passed and Satsuki still hadn’t returned from the foyer. Ryuko rinsed the last dish and placed it on the rack to dry before wiping the moisture from her own wrinkly hands onto the back of her jeans.

Just as she approached the foyer to investigate, she heard the sound of the front door closing. Peeking around the corner, Ryuko observed as Satsuki peered through the window of the door, watching the black car pull out of the driveway and disappear down the street. She stayed there for

a minute, staring blankly into the darkening sky, before she turned away from the door and noticed Ryuko. She startled slightly but recovered quickly.

“I didn’t hear you come up,” she commented nonchalantly, but Ryuko could tell that something was bothering her.

“You wanna talk about it?” Ryuko asked, cutting right to the chase. Sighing, Satsuki moved towards the bedroom with Ryuko in tow. They changed into their pajamas before climbing onto the bed and burrowing under the covers; Satsuki laid on her back, eyes glued to the ceiling, while Ryuko laid on her side, propped up on one elbow so she could see Satsuki’s face, illuminated by the single lamp on the nightstand. If Ryuko had to decipher the myriad of emotions that were subtly painted across her sister’s face, she’d guess the most prominent one was nostalgia, followed by a combination of happiness and melancholy, and something else she couldn’t place.

“It must’ve been nice to catch up with him, huh?”

Satsuki smiled slightly. “Yes, it had been awhile. I’d been wondering how he had been doing. I’m glad he’s doing so well.”

“But...?”

“I feel as though I can never repay him for being so loyal to me, despite the risk of going against mother. He was the only thing that kept me going some days...he was like the father I never had.”

“I bet he thinks of you almost like an adopted daughter, then,” Ryuko supplied.

“I suppose that’s possible,” Satsuki replied, smiling once more at the thought. “It’s just weird now, I guess, because he had been in on the plan against Ragyo as long as the plan existed, and I feel bad that I lost contact with him as soon as our goal was accomplished. That was so...inconsiderate of me. What if he thinks I was just using him?” Satsuki pondered, distress coloring her voice.

“I’m sure he doesn’t mind since you have a valid enough excuse, ya know? I can tell he still likes you as much as he did back when we were still fighting that fuckin’ monster. You’re special to him and he wouldn’t let something like separation break that bond. And no way he thinks you were using him, otherwise he wouldn’t have tried reconnecting with you.”

Satsuki was silent for a moment as she reflected on Ryuko’s words until a mischievous smile unexpectedly broke through her pensive look. In a flash, she had Ryuko trapped in a headlock and playfully (and with a little more force than necessary, though it was nothing Ryuko couldn’t handle) ruffled her younger sister’s hair. “When did you become so sensible?” she asked as Ryuko squealed and squirmed in an attempt to break out of her sister’s hold.

“I’ve always been this smart, you just like to pretend you’re the smartest one around. Maybe you couldn’t see that past your big head!” Ryuko retaliated as she struggled to roll on top of Satsuki to gain the upper hand. Unfortunately her momentum carried her too far and she ended up pinned on her belly, head pushed firmly into the mattress beneath her and Satsuki’s weight holding her down as she straddled Ryuko’s lower back.

“You know, you’ve never won in a fight against me,” Satsuki commented, a hint of her old confidence shining through.

“Whatever. I coulda kicked your ass any time since you got outta the hospital but I didn’t,” Ryuko mumbled, words muffled by the mattress.

“How very noble of you,” Satsuki scoffed, “to not attack someone who was clearly broken.”

Ryuko felt the hand on her head push her face further into the bedding. “Like that ever stopped you! You beat the shit out of me all the time, no matter what condition I was in!”

“And yet you continued to come back and provoke me. How is that my fault?”

Deciding that the iron grip nearly crushing her head had definitely crossed the boundary between “playful teasing” and “capable of causing bodily harm,” Ryuko had little choice but to back down before she found herself with a broken neck or something of the sort. “Fine. But one day when you’re back to normal we are gonna settle this once and for all,” Ryuko conceded, body slackening in a show of surrender.

“I look forward to it,” Satsuki proclaimed triumphantly as she rolled off of Ryuko’s back.

The younger girl sighed in relief as her head was released. “Jeez, if you kill me you’d never be able to get any sleep again, you know,” Ryuko joked, rubbing the back of her head where Satsuki’s hand had been moments before.

“I’m sure I’d figure something out,” Satsuki replied, settling against her pillow and grabbing a book from her nightstand.

Huffing, Ryuko swiped her DS off her own nightstand and began playing. She became fully engrossed in the game for about half an hour until the sound of Satsuki placing her book aside with more force than necessary reminded her that she was not alone and had likely been annoying her sister for the past half hour with all her cussing and enthusiastically sporadic movements. Not that she cared, though; she needed to get some kind of subtle revenge on Satsuki for earlier.

“Hey, we need to talk,” Satsuki murmured softly from her side of the bed.

Ryuko grunted, eyes still glued to her screen. “‘Bout what?”

“About...us,” Satsuki responded, waving her arm vaguely in front of her.

“What about us?” Ryuko asked distractedly as she furiously smashed buttons.

“Ok, can you put that stupid device down for one second?”

“Man, cool your fucking jets,” Ryuko growled, but closed the DS and set it in her lap exasperatedly, unhappy about being interrupted in her pursuit of beating nerds online.

“God, you’re just *so* charming,” Satsuki practically spat in annoyance.

“Yeah, well, it didn’t stop you from loving me so whatever,” came Ryuko’s retort, followed by sticking her tongue out. Satsuki seemed to soften at this, surprising Ryuko slightly.

“We need to talk about what we are.”

“Alright...” Ryuko trailed, voice laced with suspicion.

“What I’m wondering is, are we dating? I was thinking about it earlier and I feel like we already do a lot of the things that people who are dating would do, plus we already live together and all that. But we are related. Is that part weird for you? What about what other people will think? And what if something happens between us that we can’t resolve and we ruin what we already have? I can’t stand to lose you. And--”

“Yo, you’re totally rambling. It’s fine. I don’t care that we are sisters. I mean, it’s totally weird and

it's not like I casually endorse weird familial relationships but I think we are kind of an exception. We didn't grow up together, we never knew we existed or were alive, and, at least for me, I had feelings for you before I found out about being siblings. It didn't change anything for me, obviously. I don't give two shits what people think, in case you haven't figured that out yet," she chuckled as she flashed a toothy grin. "It's been, like, six months since everything went down with the drinking and hospitalization and all that and we always fix whatever comes up between us so I don't think you need to worry about that. You're right though, we do most couple things already so it's not like it would be a big adjustment to say we're dating. I mean unless you wanna just keep it on the down low for now, it's not like we have to go public with it or anything. I'm chill with whatever," she finished, crossing her arms.

Satsuki seemed relieved, though Ryuko could tell something else was still bothering her. "What else?" she prodded expectantly.

"Well," Satsuki fidgeted with the corner of the blanket in her lap, "I'm worried about...your thoughts on the whole thing."

Ryuko quirked an eyebrow at her. "Uhh, I just told you I was cool with whatever."

"No, no, I mean," she hesitated, "what about your...physical needs?" Satsuki asked, ears turning a subtle shade of pink.

Ryuko didn't miss the way her sister's hands tightened around the blanket, as if bracing herself for an unwanted answer. After a minute of deliberation, Ryuko replied, "I guess we will just have to cross that bridge when we get there. Maybe we can set up boundaries like we did before but for more...intimate touching and see what you like or don't like. If you like anything at all, that is. I dunno how you feel about, ya know, k-kissing and stuff like that," Ryuko stuttered as red colored her cheeks.

Honestly I never put much thought into it until now. I wonder how this is going to work? Then again, I've been fine the past six months so maybe it'll just be the same. We'll see, I suppose.

"Just think about what you want and I'll try to accommodate," Ryuko yawned, sliding down under the covers. "No rush. Take your time. All that jazz. I'll be here," she waved her hand almost dismissively, but Satsuki understood the true nature of the gesture.

"Alright. Thanks," Satsuki smiled, taking her place beside Ryuko under the blanket.

I hope we can make this work.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Satsuki was finding that this set of boundaries was significantly more difficult to determine than the last set.

A couple of weeks had gone by without the girls revisiting the conversation that had prompted the formation of these boundaries, but Satsuki had been unable to push the thought from her mind, despite the fact that Ryuko seemed to have completely forgotten about, or at least dropped, the subject. If she were being honest with herself, Satsuki literally had no idea what she was okay with when it came to this sort of intimacy.

And yet, she mused, look how accustomed I became to the more innocuous types of touch from Ryuko. I'm comfortable enough with it to not only tolerate but enjoy it. I never could have imagined that as being possible. Perhaps the same will be possible in this case, too.

Yet, the longer she ruminated on it, the more unsure and anxious she became. Another week was spent deep in thought on the topic until her frustration finally began to get to her. Ryuko didn't question Satsuki's behavior as the older girl snapped her book shut and rose, walking purposefully towards the bedroom. However, it hadn't gone unnoticed by the younger girl that Satsuki had not been turning the pages of her book, despite having sat with it open in front of her for over an hour, a distracted look on her face the majority of the time. Opting to give Satsuki space, Ryuko continued to watch the movie that was playing in the living room, though she perked her ears up a bit to get a clue as to where Satsuki had rushed off to. The sound of the shower starting up set Ryuko at ease, and she shifted her attention fully back to the movie.

In the bathroom, Satsuki stepped into the water, letting it cascade over her shoulders and down her back, though she made no effort to clean herself.

They say that the best ideas come when you're in the shower...let's see if that's true. Thinking back to the time Ryuko had kissed her a month earlier, she tried to remember the emotions she'd experienced then. I'd have to say that shock was probably the most prevalent emotion at that time, but what else? Confusion? Yes, definitely confusion. What was that feeling in my chest? Anxiety? Or something else? Or maybe even a combination? I guess I won't know unless I actually try it again, but is it something that I'd want to do again? I mean it's not like I felt disgust at the time so maybe it wouldn't be so bad. I just cannot shake the feeling that these negative emotions are overshadowing any positive ones that I may be able to glean from the situation.

After a moment of consideration, Satsuki resolved that by the end of the day she would have a solid opinion about kissing, and gaining some experience seemed to be the best way to do so. *One step at a time*, she mused as she finally began the process of cleaning herself.

How does one even go about kissing someone though? Should I ask her first or just go for it? No, consent is important so I will have to ask her. Then should I hint about it? Maybe throw together a nice dinner and movie night? That is so sappy and over the top though. She chuckled, imagining Ryuko's inevitable suspicion to a meal set out with rose petals littering a candlelit tabletop. Or...I could just go ask her if I could kiss her. Direct and effective. A good plan, consent clearly given by both parties and boundaries respected, I like it.

Satisfied, Satsuki rinsed her hair and stepped out of the shower, toweling herself off in the

steaming hot bathroom. As she dressed, she tried to determine whether now or later was a better time to enact her plan. Deciding it would be best to get it over with as soon as possible before she could lose her resolve, she dressed herself with purpose and strode out of the bathroom and into the living room where Ryuko sat, still absorbed by the movie. Hearing her sister approach, Ryuko turned and gave her a look.

“Everything okay? That was a really long shower.”

“Yes, I was just doing some thinking while I was in there and must have lost track of time.”

Ryuko hummed in acknowledgement. “Anything you want to talk about?”

“Yes, actually,” the elder replied, heartbeat picking up slightly. “I was wondering if you would want, or would be willing to...well, kiss me, so that I can see if it is something that I would find enjoyable. Only if you are totally willing, though. Don’t do anything just for my sake.”

Ryuko scratched the back of her neck as her cheeks flushed at the unexpected request. “Are ya sure about this? Not that I don’t wanna help with your little, uh, experiment here but like...I mean...are you sure you’re ready?”

“Yes, I’m certain that this is something that I’d like to try,” Satsuki replied firmly, though her hands had begun to feel clammy. “I just have one request right now, and that is that you refrain from using your hands anywhere other than on my face. I’m not ready for all of that yet.”

Ryuko nodded and sat up on the couch, patting the empty space next to her. Satsuki obliged and sat beside Ryuko, nervously wringing her hands in her lap. “You sure you wanna do this?” Ryuko asked again, sensing her sister’s anxiety.

“Absolutely.”

“Then do you wanna initiate it or would you rather I do it?”

Satsuki paused for a second in contemplation before answering. “I think you should initiate since I don’t have much experience.”

“Okay. Ready?”

Satsuki nodded, gripping her knees as Ryuko leaned in slowly. Mimicking her behavior, Satsuki also began moving forward, albeit at a much slower pace. They paused, faces inches apart. Satsuki could feel Ryuko’s breath, short puffs of warm air tickling her face. The younger raised a hand and slowly cupped the side of the elder’s face, threading her fingers lightly through the long, still slightly damp tresses. Satsuki instinctively leaned into the touch, seeking the warmth and comfort she’d come to expect from her sibling. She relaxed ever so slightly, giving Ryuko the opportunity to make a move. Gently, she pressed her lips to her sister’s, reveling in the softness and warmth.

Satsuki had tensed briefly but quickly relaxed, though an indescribable feeling had filled her chest once more. Trying to ignore the feeling, she focused on the way Ryuko’s lips felt on her own as they moved slowly and tenderly. After a minute, Satsuki decided that this wasn’t the worst thing that she’d ever experienced, to say the least, though the feeling in her chest was beginning to feel overwhelming. She broke away and took a deep breath in an attempt to dissipate the tightness.

“Is everything alright?” Ryuko asked, concern painted all over her face as she withdrew her hand.

Satsuki nodded breathlessly. “There is a feeling in my chest that I cannot identify, and I cannot tell if it is a good or bad feeling.”

“We can stop if you’re uncomfortable,” Ryuko quickly responded.

“No, wait, let’s try one more time.”

“Alright,” came Ryuko’s skeptical reply.

Satsuki’s pulse quickened once more as the distance closed between them and they locked lips. This time, the feeling in her chest seemed to turn warm, and before she knew what she was doing she had put both hands on Ryuko’s face, cupping her cheeks tenderly. Ryuko had been surprised by the gesture but quickly reciprocated in kind by snaking a hand under her sister’s hair and resting it on the nape of her neck. Satsuki hummed into Ryuko’s mouth at the sensation, causing the younger girl to deepen the kiss. After a few minutes, the girls broke apart, faces flushed, chests heaving as they gasped for air.

“So...what do you think?” Ryuko asked between huffed breaths. Satsuki was silent for a moment before climbing onto Ryuko’s lap and pressing her lips more fervently to her sister’s, fingers weaving into Ryuko’s hair. Ryuko growled lowly in approval and went to move her hands forward to touch Satsuki before remembering the rules set out before this experience had begun. After a brief second of hesitation, her hands once more traveled to Satsuki’s face, caressing her jaw. The elder shifted against Ryuko, who failed to suppress a whine. She’d suddenly become hyperaware of the way her sister felt above her: how her hot breath tickled her face, the way her breasts felt as they pressed against her own with each rise and fall of their chests, the fingernails scraping lightly at her scalp sending shivers down her spine. This was rapidly becoming too much for Ryuko to handle.

“We gotta chill for a minute,” the younger girl gasped out as she pushed Satsuki away as gently but firmly as possible. To her surprise, Satsuki’s pupils were as dilated as she presumed her own were at the moment.

“What’s wrong?” Satsuki asked breathlessly.

Ryuko shifted uncomfortably under her sister’s weight. “Uh, well, I just am...like, *really* enjoying this and I don’t wanna accidentally cross any boundaries here, ya know, in the heat of the moment.”

Satsuki cocked her head for a moment before her eyes widened as a wave of understanding passed over. In that moment, she realized that she really, truly trusted Ryuko not to hurt her. In her mind, there was now a distinct divide between how Ragyo and Ryuko treated the act that was currently happening. While Ragyo had used touch to hurt and control and take advantage, Ryuko only had Satsuki’s best interests in mind and was unwilling to do anything that Satsuki wasn’t completely comfortable with. In fact, Ryuko had demonstrated this for the entirety of the time that they had lived together. It was totally incomparable to her past experiences, a foreign concept that she was suddenly more than willing to explore with the person currently fidgeting beneath her. She smiled, a genuine smile filled with love, tenderness, and a hint of excitement.

“Ryuko, it’s okay. I trust you more than anyone and I know you would never hurt me or do anything without my consent. You’ve proven this time and time again since the beginning of my recovery. I want to do this with you.”

Hesitating, Ryuko stammered, “B-but, your boundaries...?”

“If it were anyone else here with you right now, what would you be doing to them that you feel uncomfortable doing to me? List them off and I’ll tell you if it’s acceptable or not.”

Ryuko's face had turned as red as the streak in her hair. "W-well, I want...I mean, I'd like to...only if you're cool with it..."

"Spit it out, Ryuko," Satsuki laughed.

"I-I wanna grab your ass!" Ryuko nearly shouted, face turning a fine shade of maroon. "Your ass is a godsend, holy shit, I just want to sink my fingers into it and squeeze--"

"Then go ahead," Satsuki replied simply.

Ryuko sputtered unintelligibly before forcing out a wheezed "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I'll let you know if I feel uncomfortable. Can you trust me to do that?" Ryuko nodded numbly, in shock at the prospect of finally being able to feel the famous, tantalizing Kiryuin ass with her own two hands. She realized she must have zoned out a bit while imagining this, because she was startled back into reality by fingers snapping in front of her face.

"Earth to Ryuko, are you still in there? You're drooling a little bit."

Swallowing harshly, Ryuko shook her head to clear her mind. "Okay, I'm back now," she joked nervously. Gently grasping her sister's forearms, Satsuki pulled Ryuko's hands forward and placed them on her hips before leaning forward once more to capture her lips. The younger girl melted, and within a minute of passionate making out, she finally found the courage to slide her hands further back and grab the object of her dreams, squeezing it gently through the tight yoga pants that contained it.

This is it. I've officially died and gone to heaven. A whimper escaped Ryuko's throat as the thought passed through her head. She made sure to feel as much as she could, as if trying to cement the experience in her mind on the off chance that it never happened again.

Meanwhile, Satsuki was finding the experience fairly enjoyable and became bolder as time went on, trailing her fingers along Ryuko's jaw before moving both hands down to caress her sister's ribs under her shirt, fingers sliding easily over the prominent bones. She felt goosebumps erupt over Ryuko's flesh at the action, prompting her to scrape her fingernails lightly along the younger's sides. A gentle nibble and tug on Satsuki's lower lip was Ryuko's retaliation, along with a much stronger grope to her behind. Satsuki bit back a surprised "eep!" while Ryuko nearly purred in approval.

"Hey," Ryuko pulled back for a second, breathing heavily, "is it okay if I slap your ass?"

Satsuki cringed slightly as an unpleasant memory tried to push its way to the front of her mind. "No, sorry, but that is not acceptable right now. Or maybe ever, honestly."

"That's fine," Ryuko replied in a soothing voice. She'd caught on to the change in the atmosphere and could sense that Satsuki was no longer in a kissing mood, judging by how tense she'd become. "Ya wanna just cuddle?" Ryuko offered sympathetically.

A moment of hesitation followed by a nod was Satsuki's response. She climbed off of Ryuko and waited until the younger sibling had wedged herself into the corner of the couch where the armrest met the back before climbing into the crook of Ryuko's arm and resting her head on her chest.

"Sorry for bringing up bad memories."

"Sorry for letting them get in the way of enjoying ourselves."

Ryuko gently headbutted her sister. “You don’t gotta apologize for something that ain’t your fault. We will work through this just like everything else. Baby steps, ya know?”

Satsuki nodded, calmed by the steady sound of the heartbeat resonating through her sister’s chest. “Yes. Baby steps.”

“We’re already making progress, so that’s good. It’ll get better, just like it has been.”

Satsuki murmured her agreement before falling silent, enjoying her sister’s quiet company and looking forward to the future with hope.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, surprise, I'm still alive. This story will get done eventually, even if it takes me years (which at the rate I'm going, it just might take that long lmao). Comments are always appreciated. Thanks for sticking with me!

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